"YOUR TURN!"

Natalia Durova

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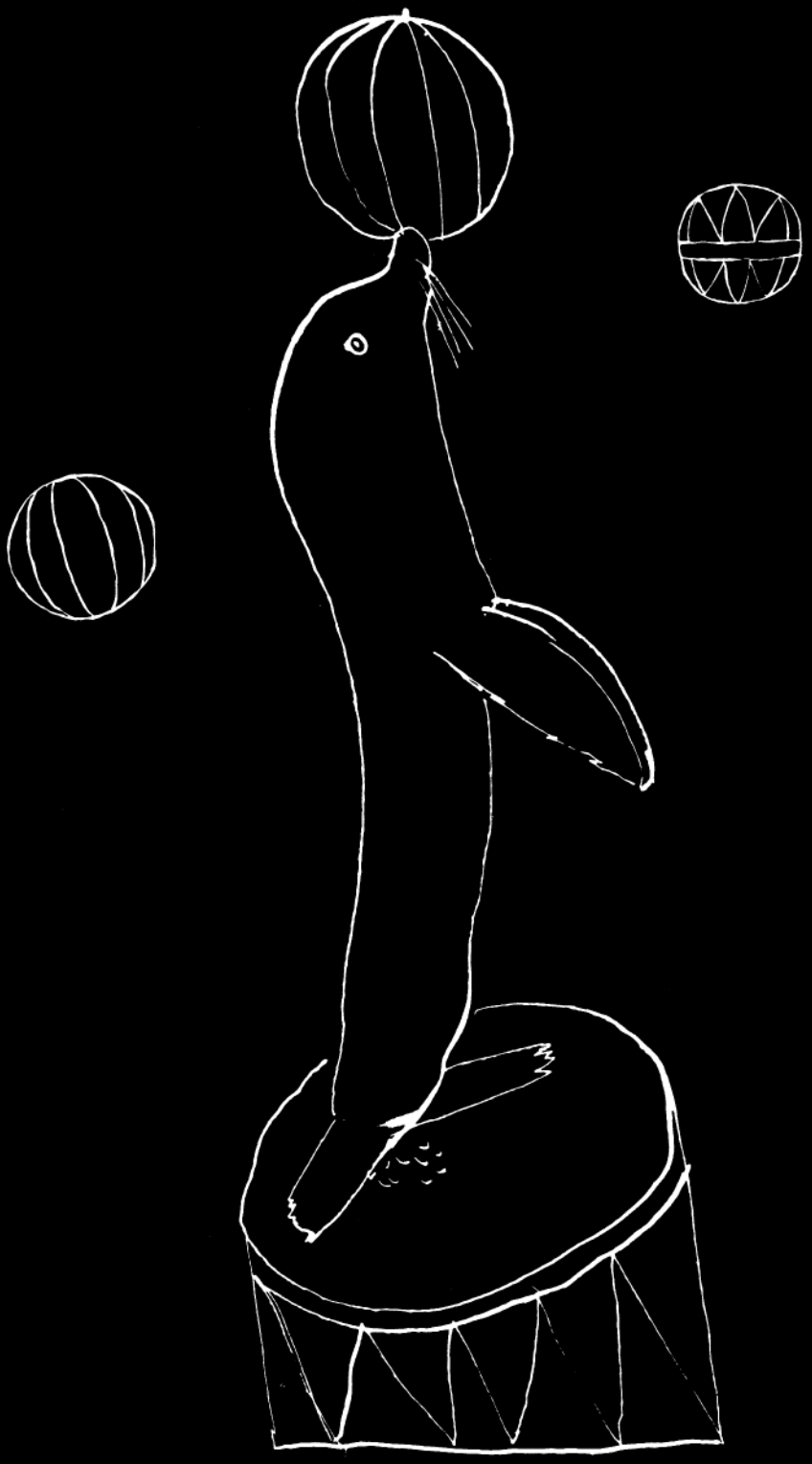

NATALIA DUROVA

"YOUR TURN!"

Stories

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY JAN BUTLER

Designed by A. Markevich and K. Syunnerberg

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CONTENTS

"Your Turn!"
7

Stories
59

Kolka's Opening Night
60

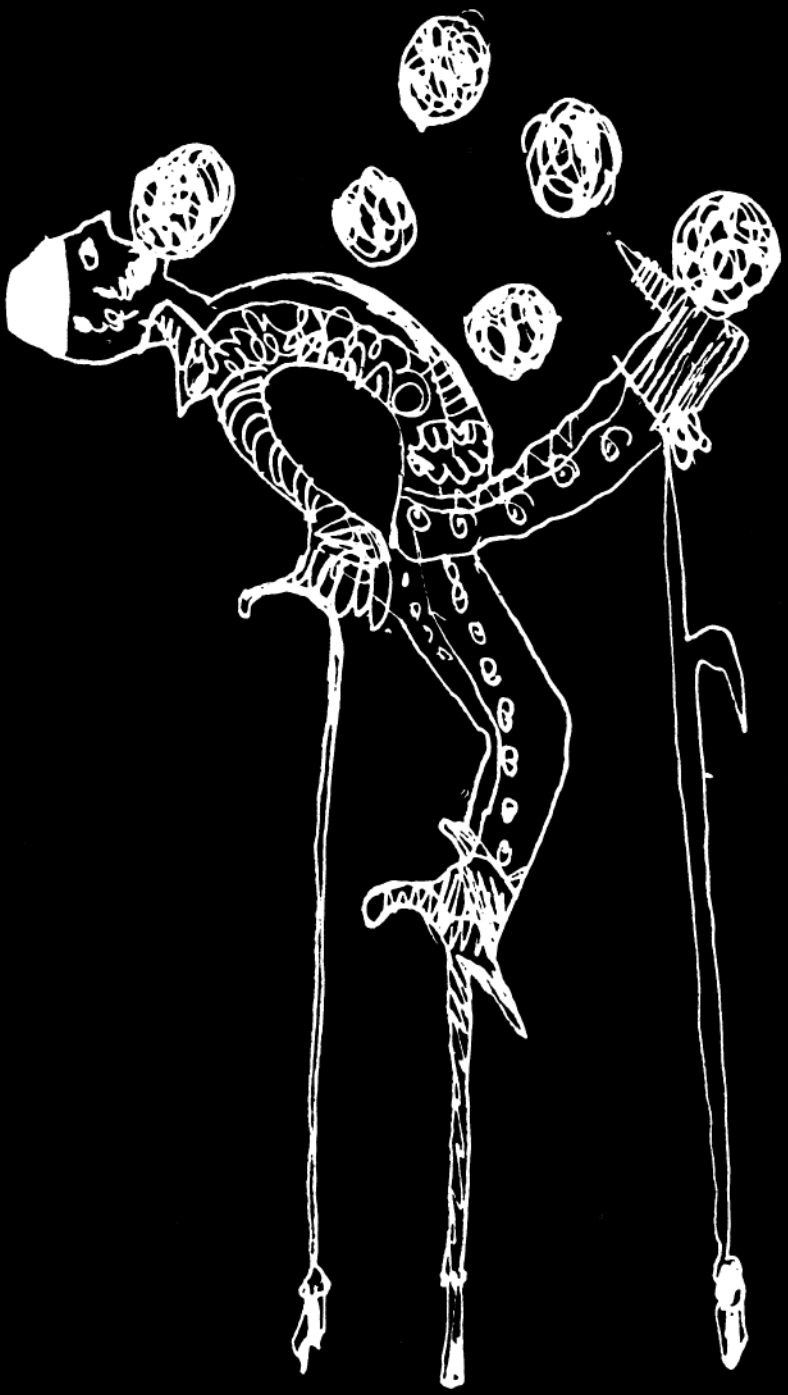
The Death of Old Jumbo
100

The Children's Theatre
115

Travelling Animals
143

Afterword.

Natalia Durova: Her Life and Books by N. Khalatov
213



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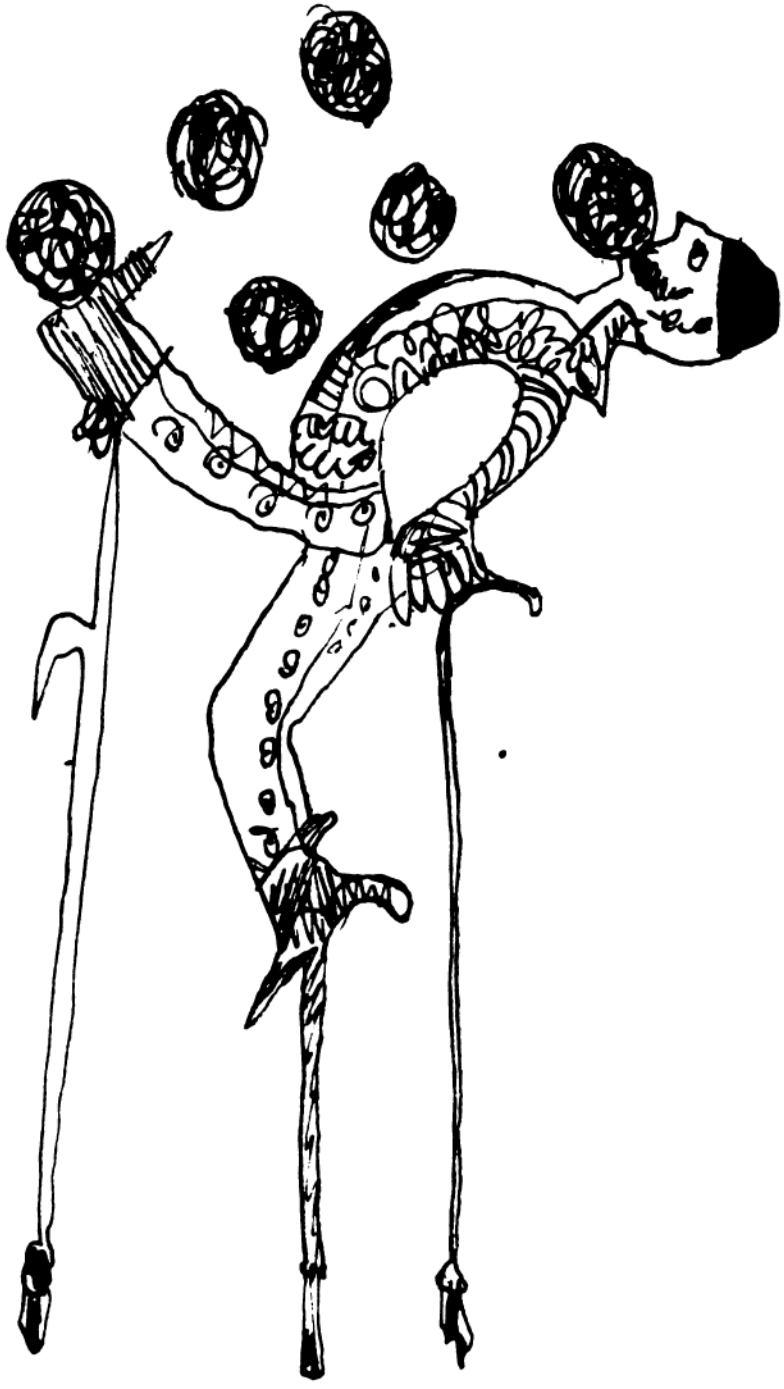


In memory of my parents--
Zinaida and Yuri Durov,
who devoted their lives
to the Soviet circus

ZINAIDA DUROVA

YURI DUROV

THE AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

My meeting with the elephant didn't take place in a circus or a zoo. A barge had got lost in the port of Odessa. Yes, I meant what I said, it had got lost because it was surrounded by huge, towering cranes which looked like iron giraffes and by steamers hooting loudly at one another. The small barge with the elephant on board stood in the midst of them. The elephant had been pensioned off but he wasn't leaving alone: Piccolo the donkey was going with him. They stood, as always, next to each other: the huge elephant and his tiny, faithful donkey friend.

A short hoot came from the tug. A turban of smoke instantly wafted proudly above its funnel, swayed, greeting the sky before sailing and then began to dissolve. The elephant's floppy ears flapped heavily and the donkey looked alert. Then suddenly they both began roaring in a duet, one trumpeting loudly, the other braying. This was perhaps their solemn farewell salute to the circus and Odessa. Perhaps, this is what it reminded me of then. I then regretted I hadn't kept a diary of my childhood. I was now seeing it before me with my own eyes. The elephant was my diary. Every wrinkle around his eyes and on his trunk and the scar on his leg were landmarks of my circus childhood. And this was its last page: the elephant was going into retirement.

The barge was already swaying on the waves and becoming fainter and fainter but I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was, you see, my childhood that was floating away to sea forever.

Chapter I

I remember myself when my father and I would walk round the wings of the circus and I could answer his questions correctly:

"Who's standing here?"

"The elephant."

"And who's lying down here?"

"The camel."

"And who's next to him?"

"The donkey."

I soon grew tired of answering questions and wanted to ask them myself but my mother and father were too busy to spend much time on me and the Great Dane left in charge of me was nervous and bad-tempered and, what's more, would only say one word—"Mummy"—in the hope of getting a bite of my roll. Klyuch, as he was called, didn't obey me and that's why my father was always pleased with him. He would stroke him and say: "Good boy, Klyuch. Mother and I trust you with our treasure. You're her nanny, her guard and her friend. You won't let us down, Natasha obeys you, doesn't she? Isn't that so, Natasha?"

"Yeth," I reluctantly agreed and ran to my mother.

"Mummy, Mummy! What's a treasure?"

"A treasure is something one loves more than anything else."

"Then what's Daddy's?"

Mother looked puzzled for a moment but I wouldn't leave her alone.

"What's Daddy's treasure then?"

Mother sighed with relief, smiled and said: "Why the circus, of course!"

Oh, I could understand that! I could spell out the electric light-bulb letters which formed the word "circus". But why did they leave me in the hotel and go off to the circus? How offended I was! I didn't like hotels. The furniture was always arranged too neatly in them. There were always jugs of water smelling of medicine and doors which locked firmly so that Klyuch and I couldn't get out. Yes, those hours of lonely waiting were sometimes horrible. I then saw in my mind's eye my mother and father as they really were. I imagined them at the circus and looked at their pictures on the wall in which they were always smiling and taking no notice of my tantrums and tears.

I want to go to the circus, I thought, and one day I actually did! The room service woman opened the door and Klyuch and I set off. I ran out first and Klyuch followed me.

"Why have you taken your dog into the corridor?" I was asked by a large, stout woman with a bucket out of which a rag was hanging.

"Corridor!" I repeated the new word.

"Yes, into the corridor," the woman said in a moralising tone.

So, the circus must be at the end of the corridor, I decided, and Klyuch, who had suddenly pricked up his ears, walked obediently beside me for the first time. We came to the end of the long, soft carpet-strip and the staircase stretched ahead of us. We went slowly down the steps one by one and then walked along the street. I fell down. Klyuch grabbed my dress with his teeth and helped me to get up. We walked on and I kept tripping. I finally grew tired and started to cry. Klyuch sat down beside me and people crowded round us.

"Why are you crying, little girl?"

I said nothing.

"Where are you from?"

"The circus," I grew calmer.

"The circus?! Well, but where do you live?" an old man with glasses asked me. I looked at him in admiration because his glasses lit up whenever a car passed.

"I live in a corridor!"

"She doesn't want to rest, Mummy!"

"How do you know?"

"If she wanted to rest, she'd lie down but she's standing and swaying."

"No, Natasha, you don't know anything yet. Come over here and I'll explain something to you."

I got down.

"Listen and I'll tell you how elephants sleep. Elephants never lie down to sleep. They sleep standing on their feet as if they're dozing. If an elephant lies down, it means something's wrong and if he stays lying down, it means he's sick."

I whispered down the elephant's trunk, pretending I was speaking to her on the telephone: "It's hard for you to sleep standing. If you like I'll bring you lots of hay, much more than you've got here and you'll feel better. You can keep your legs as they are but your tummy will rest on hay. Alright?"

I fussed about and brought armfuls of hay but to my dismay I saw that there wasn't enough. I climbed onto the hay but I still couldn't reach Lilly's tummy. It stretched out above me like a ceiling. I felt sad and sat down on the floor where the elephants were standing and suddenly a shower of hay fell on my head. Lilly was enthusiastically pouring hay over me. I looked like a scarecrow but I stood still, inhaling the unfamiliar sweet, spicy smell. I saw how Piccolo the donkey began to quiver his nostrils as he caught scent of it. He dropped down on the hay and began wallowing in it like a pig in a puddle.

I soon got fed up of the ticklish dry hay and, working my way free, went over to where my wonderland ended: the polar bears' cage. I wasn't allowed in there but I very much wanted to make friends with the bears. Two heaps of snow were sitting in the cage. They weren't very white and more like the heaps of snow which road-sweepers shovel up in the early morning. Mother tried to convince me that they were vicious. They didn't enjoy playing in sunny woods, she said, and their eyes were cold and empty.

But I was still attracted to these two dirty, off white heaps of snow. In the winter I was bought a new white rabbit fur coat, felt boots and a fluffy hat. I would walk about the circus yard picking up snow in my sodden mittens. I made a rather big snowball and

hugging it ran to the bears. They perhaps liked playing snowballs, I thought. I threw the snowball into the cage. It smashed against the bars and the snow scattered across the floor, forming puddles instantly. One of the bears began licking the snow from the bars. I brought more. The bears eagerly ate the snow. I grew bolder. I put some snow on a plywood board and, imitating the keepers, began lifting the cage door, trying to push the snow on a tray into the cage. The door was heavy. I had to hold it up with both hands. I didn't know how to do it. Then I rested my head against the door and reached for the snow. Suddenly my feet flew upwards and I heard the door click: the polar bear had dragged me into the cage with his paw! He stood over me, snorting. The fur of my coat moved up and down under his breath. I stood on all fours opposite him. His small eyes gazed indifferently at me. I stretched out my hand to him but he stepped back.

I was about to stand up but the bear knocked me down with his paw and began rolling me across the cage.

"I'm not a ball!" I exclaimed angrily.

The other bear lollopped over to me.

"Lilly!" I began shrieking. "They are playing football with me like bulldogs! Lilly!!!"

The elephant trumpeted in alarm and someone shouted in the circus: "Durov, call Durov quick! His daughter's in the polar bears' cage!"

The two bears rolled me across the cage.

I at last heard a voice which sounded like my father's: "Quiet! Get some fish, quick!"

The bears left me alone and lifted their heads. I lifted mine, too. A fish flew over us into the far-off corner of the cage.

"Natasha!" This was my father's voice but it sounded slightly different and too clear. "Natasha, don't move or get up."

Father came into the cage, went past me towards the bears, turned his back to me and now spoke in his usual voice: "Get out of the cage quick, you silly girl!"

I jumped down onto the floor and rushed to my mother. Everyone around at once started talking for some reason. Only mother stood silently, stopping up her mouth with her hands and looking at the cage. She took no notice of me. Father was soon beside us

but mother kept staring at the cage where the bears were growling and gulping down fish. Father hugged mother's shoulders.

"There, there, dear, it's over now. Look, there she is beside you. Zina, do you hear me, calm down!"

"It's a miracle! A real miracle!" the circus people said.

"The girl was born lucky, that's all!"

"Tell us what saved her," they asked my father.

"A child's fearlessness and trust. That's all," said father pensively. Mother gasped for breath.

Chapter III

My friends were circus artists. Chizhik was six years old. He was an acrobat. He had a splendid costume and patent leather boots. Every evening his fringe was curled with tongs and he came out of the dressing-room to look triumphantly at me and I instantly forgot that it was I who won our fights and he usually ran off to tell tales.

I felt very sad in the evenings. Chizhik was already performing. Nonna Lugovaya hadn't started performing in the ring yet but she rehearsed in the mornings while I was still playing with the animals. Playing games now, however, was sometimes boring.

"Daddy, when am I going to perform?" I kept asking my father.

"You've got to grow up first. When you come up to the elephant's shoulder, I'll let you go into the ring," father laughed.

I ran to the elephants' stall and measured myself against Lilly. I only came up to her knee.

"Natasha!" Nonna called to me. "Come for a walk with us!"

Nonna was a kind girl. She had two brothers. She took them by the hand and we walked into the garden in front of the circus.

"Let's play a ring game," Nonna suggested,

We sat down together on a bench and Nonna walked round us pretending to put a ring in our palms.

"Give the ring to me!" Nonna shouted.

I jumped up and began to enjoy myself. I gave the ring to Slavik, Nonna's younger brother.

"Give the ring to me!" I shouted.

Everyone kept quiet and Slavik happily rolled the metal ring we were playing with from cheek to cheek with his tongue.

"Slavik!" Nonna called sternly to him. "You mustn't do that. Spit it out right now or you'll swallow it!"

"Let's go back to the circus, Nonna. My daddy's rehearsing now. Come on," I hurried Nonna along, seeing Chizhik come out of the circus.

"No. Natasha, the boys have got to take a walk. You go by yourself, alright? The boys must have a breath of fresh air."

Chizhik stopped by some boys I'd never seen before. "He's lucky!" I sighed. "He's a performer and everyone knows him!"

How quickly he became friends with the boys.

Nonna silently adjusted Slavik's collar but Chizhik just would have to come up to us and say slightingly: "Why are you taking up the whole bench? Bored, are you?"

"We're playing," Nonna said reproachfully and, turning to the boys who had come up with Chizhik, said: "Do you want to play with us? Please do if you like."

We made room for them and sat on the bench chatting.

"We've got apples in our garden at home," one boy told us.

"My Dad brought a palm from the south and it grows in a room at home," said another.

I racked my brains to think of what grew in our circus. My gaze fell upon the brightly-coloured poster on the front of the circus.

"And that's what always grows quickly in our circus," I said, pointing to the poster.

"Ha-ha-ha," Chizhik laughed and the others tittered after him.

"Perhaps you're going to tell them that you work at the circus?"

Chizhik teased me. "She's not a performer, she's just a fibber and a chatter-box."

"Stop picking on her! Natasha's still small. She'll grow up and become a trainer. And anyway, she's got a real live elephant," Nonna defended me.

But I felt hurt: I wasn't a performer. The boys didn't notice I was hurt and looked curiously at me.

"Have you really got an elephant?"

"Yes!"

"What colour is it?"

"Dark blue," I replied.

"Don't listen to her any more. There's no such thing as a dark-blue elephant," Chizhik interrupted me. The others turned away from me.

I ran off to the circus in tears.

"Lilly, Lilly!" I sobbed. In the shadowy light of the stall the elephant really did look dark-blue. I had told the truth. I came to learn colours, letters and words in the circus stalls and I described what I saw and knew.

An animal joyfully running out to a rehearsal, dozing with pleasure after a large meal and angrily roaring at someone who has offended it—that's what life meant to me.

An empty cage, sacking hanging mournfully on the bars and the air smelling of disinfectant—that meant death.

I could already feel life and understand death in my own way but there was something else beyond my comprehension which, as mother put it, begins with the first days of one's life and ends with death: work. I wanted to work. I was going to become a performer.

I wiped away my tears and rushed like the wind to my father who was busy with his animals in the ring.

"What's the meaning of this?" Father's eyebrows knitted.

"I've come to rehearse," I said resolutely to my father.

"You can fool about in the wings if you like. Go away, you're disturbing me."

"I've come to work."

"Well, you are stubborn, you really are. Alright, you can consider I've taken you on. Here's the whip. Take it and go to the dressing-room and practise cracking it."

The whip was a sort of rod but it was made in a special way. It looked like a fishing rod but it was hard to crack. It was three times bigger than me.

I thought for a moment and then rushed out into the garden in a trice. Chizhik was, of course, showing off in front of the boys there. Just you wait, I thought, I'll give you what for!

A few minutes later I was standing in the corner, frowning and sullenly silent. Mother was sitting at the make-up table, waiting for father to return from his rehearsal.

"Who gave you the whip? You can remain silent if you like but you'll have to speak with Daddy if you do."

Father finally appeared.

"Just look at her! She gave Chizhik a beating with the whip. I haven't a clue where she got it from."

"I gave it to her," father replied guiltily.

"Why?" mother asked in such a tone that I thought father would soon be standing next to me in the corner.

"She was disturbing my rehearsal and I had to get rid of her."

"Get rid of me!" I shrieked and began to cry loudly.

"You're so thoughtless! Don't you understand you're dealing with a child? You lied to her. White lies sometimes don't matter but in this instance..."

"Zina," my father interrupted. When he was nervous my father always called my mother by her name but otherwise he called her "mother". Following his example, a lot of people in the circus called her "mother", too.

"Zina, I can't take risks with her, you know. The child's four but you're demanding she's made into a trainer! She's not old enough!"

"First of all, I'm not demanding that and secondly, I don't want the girl to grow up bad-tempered and envious. Have a think and decide whether we're to leave her in Moscow and let her grow up without the circus..."

"She's my daughter and I'm going to bring her up myself!" father said angrily.

"Then make a proper job of it. She's no different from the other children here, so let her live in the circus like all the rest. It's not right to protect her, and protect her from what—that's the main

thing—from being able to work! You mustn't begin by deceiving her. Heavens, if you only remembered your own childhood!" Mother turned resentfully away from us, took grandfather's photograph and put it in front of father.

"I see. Just like he did, right?"

Mother nodded.

"Clever girl!" father kissed mother's hand. "So, I should make lessons out of games. Come with me, Natasha! Come on, young trainer." And, laughing, father and I walked towards the ring.

Chapter IV

Father was in charge of my education and upbringing and, naturally, I inherited his character. Everyone used to say that I was a chip off the old block. Father stood beside me and directed my movements with his hand. I squeezed the whip and felt like sitting down for a short rest. Four stands with vases on top of them were set up in the ring in front of us. Doves were in the vases. I had to perform with four small ponies in a small number on the programme. The ponies cantered smoothly round the ring. At a wave of the hand they formed pairs and at another wave, the pairs moved towards each other. At a crack of the whip each of them went round the stand. I cracked the whip again, the vases opened and the doves perched on the horse-cloths which closely fitted the ponies' rumps. When I waved my hand again the horses stood head-to-head in a line before me. When I moved my forefinger they bowed down, the doves flew to me and I was hid, almost lost amidst the doves' flapping wings. I lifted my arms and the ponies reared or simply quivered on their hind-legs.

It was hard enough to hold the whip but even harder to remember the correct movements. Father would lose his temper at the rehearsals and even shouted sometimes. I tried as hard as I could not to cry.

"What did I say! Move your hand to the left! The left!" father ordered.

I hadn't time to work out which was the left before my hand jerked forwards and, knocked out of time, the ponies shied away from me towards the barrier.

"She's muddle-headed," my exasperated father wearily complained to mother. Mother hugged me tenderly.

"You're wrong, Yura! You want her to keep time but how can she when she doesn't know music theory?"

"Oh, that's not the point. I can't keep my eyes on her. She knocks the ponies about and shoves her fingers in their mouths. You see, mother, she's too young."

"I want to perform, Daddy!" I kept repeating in dismay.

"You will perform! What enthusiasm! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Let's have lunch," mother said.

In mother's presence we all forgot our grudges and quarrels and cheerfully walked along the street to the hotel. We stopped at the curb to wait for the traffic to pass. Grinning, mother hugged us.

"Look! Who's that, Natasha?"

"A militiaman, Mummy!" I shouted joyfully.

"A traffic-controller!" father corrected me and catching mother's eye, continued: "Natasha, look at his truncheon. What's it like?"

"It's magic like Kio the juggler's."

"Oh, Natasha! It's an ordinary stick but he knows how to use his hands," father said sadly.

"There you go again! Wait a minute. There's no point getting upset. Show us both how the ponies should move. We'll practise and Natasha will become a traffic-controller in the ring. Agreed?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Now let's get home quickly for lunch!" mother hurried us.

"Home." Strangely enough, the word "home" meant the same for me as the word "mother". We didn't have an ordinary home with walls like everyone else. We were always on the move with the circus. Houses, hotels, train bunk-beds and railway tracks

flashed by one after the other. However, if mother was beside me and we had lunch together and used even an old poster as a tablecloth, this meant home. Perhaps that's why many people at the circus also called my mother "mother". She had qualities for which she was dearly loved, dependable for them like a house that people live in.

How easy and simple I found it in the morning to remember the way the horses should move. Nonna, Chizhik, Slavik and mother played with me. They were the ponies and I was their trainer.

I used a willow twig instead of a whip. I skilfully moved it, imagining I was a traffic-controller. Mother clapped her hands and the "make-believe" rehearsal was over.

"I know some don't like their codliver oil?" mother looked cunningly at us.

"I do, Mummy Zina!" Nonna's brother, Slavik, reached towards mother.

"Good boy! But wait till you see how the sea lions drink it! Would you like to?" mother asked.

We ran after her to the pool. Three sea lions, three black noses were poking through the grating. In the mornings the sea lions didn't look like shiny rubber boots. They had only just woken up and were completely dry and different-coloured. Pashka, the biggest one, was dark brown with grey flecks on his supple neck; Lotus, the slightly smaller one, was greyish-beige and Lark, an affectionate, small sea lioness, was dove-grey with brown specks on her dry bristling fur. All three ran up to drink the codliver oil. Mother poured it straight onto the fish as if she were pouring vegetable oil onto a salad. The three black noses bobbed up and down, following mother's hands.

"Natasha, what do I need to do now to feed the sea lions?" mother asked me.

"Give them a dip," I replied confidently.

"Jump in, quick," mother called to the sea lions and opened the cage-door separating the animals from the pool.

Chizhik, Nonna and Slavik inquisitively watched them swimming. Lark was the first to move towards the diving board leading into the water. She dived in agilely and began swimming. Next, Lotus plopped in, raising a fountain of spray. Pashka, however, huddled

patiently by the cage-door, waiting for the piece of fish with which mother was distracting his attention. I knew the reason for this. Pashka was very strong. He was the boss in the cage and if he went into the water first, he felt he was the boss there, too, and attacked poor Lotus without rhyme or reason, bit him and drove him into the cage.

"To take Pashka under control, we must let out the smaller and weaker ones first," father decided. "They'll take over the pool and Pashka will come to think of himself as a guest there. Animals also have rules of conduct."

He turned out to be right. Pashka was a well-mannered guest but too cumbersome: he took up the whole pool. He swam along roaring deeply.

They were given their breakfast. Each one had his own bucket. Only Lark ate out of a small basin. Sea lions don't chew: they gulp down the fish in one go. They don't have teeth to chew on—only fangs to catch fish with. When they've caught a fish, they toss it in the air, catch it and swallow. They aren't just playing about but doing it for a reason. You see, if a sea lion in the sea swallows a fish tail first, a sharp fin might scratch its throat. So that's why they toss the fish in the air.

"Will my assistant Natasha come for a rehearsal," my father called to me.

I walked proudly past Chizhik and dashed into the ring.

"You're quite different today. Well done, darling!" father praised me. "Come on, get your ponies to rear."

The four ponies reared.

"Get them to bow! Clever girl!"

"Look, Daddy, Starry doesn't want to get up!" I walked up to Starry the smallest pony. She was kneeling. That day her eyes looked sad and rather wild. Her black forelock was wet with sweat.

"Starry!" I offered her a sugar lump.

"Hang on, Natasha!" father stopped me. He carefully examined Starry. "Starry's sick!" Father helped her to get up and she was led out of the ring.

"Natasha, now you and I are going to rehearse in a different way for a while and in a month's time we'll rehearse with the ponies again."

My joy immediately left me. The elephants were led out to father in the ring and I sat by myself in the first row. Lilly glanced towards me every now and then. I wanted to give her the sugar which Starry hadn't eaten but I wasn't allowed to: she was busy now. Father was rehearsing in the ring.

Rehearsing in a "different way" meant learning to see, feel and know my work. That's how father put it. I passed through the first stage: I learnt to see it. I saw the circus. In the winter it was in a warm tower-like stone building. If you opened the door slightly and let the air in, steam would rise out of every corner as if someone was breathing there. In winter the circus was a cosy nook for everyone. In summer, on the other hand, the stables were like a busy station. Even the elephants wanted to take a stroll in the yard and in Smolensk they bathed in the river.

"Make sure the Dnieper doesn't flood its banks. They're heavy vessels, you know. Two elephants weigh four tons," the water-transport workers joked with my father.

Lilly, however, walked calmly into the water with Piccolo the donkey followed confidently by the second elephant, Mirza and their two trunks turned into fountains.

The artists settled down beside them here. Some took a dip and others rinsed their laundry in the clear water. Lilly was a good-natured, calm elephant but Mirza was mischievous. One day she went up to a basin of laundry and the laundry disappeared in a trice. She ate a pink pair of tights and two pillow cases and then cheerfully went off for a swim. Lilly always gave in to Mirza although she was older than her but I wasn't on friendly terms with Mirza because she sometimes took a whole loaf of bread away from Lilly. Lilly liked both winter and summer circuses but Mirza only liked summer ones. Of course, if this hadn't been so, she wouldn't have taken the planks of the ceiling apart above her head in Chelyabinsk which caused Lilly to get a sore throat. She lay covered in cloths and father made her drink two buckets of hot tea with wine and raspberry jam. Lilly obediently drank them but then she tried to throw off the cloths with her trunk because she was hot. Father, however, carefully covered her again and held her trunk in his hands. All the time while our Lilly was sick father spent at the circus. He didn't even leave her at night.

No, I wasn't friendly with Mirza and I didn't like summer circuses. The circus top in summer was tarpaulin. When the wind blew, it puffed out and in the rain, it sagged, threatening to flood the ring with six swelling pools of water. The season ended in autumn and then the summer circus became very dreary. The animals were taken away, the top was dismantled and the circus stood like a bedraggled dandelion.

"I've already seen the circus, Daddy!" I confusedly described my impressions to my father who listened, nodding his head and interrupting me from time to time: "But what about the ring, Natasha?"

"The ring..." I indecisively fell silent.

Father took me to the ring. We sat down on the barrier and I huddled against him.

"The rings in all circuses are the same. They used to say that circus artists don't have a home and lead a nomadic kind of life: they arrive at a circus, you see, and the walls and the floor are just the same, and what's most important, the ring is just as much a home for them as it is for the animals. That's why our Lilly can perform on the opening night just as confidently in any town even without rehearsing. Do you see what I mean, Natasha? Today, for instance, everyone in the circus is resting. Look at the top. You see, the safety rope and the trapeze are twisted together like wrung laundry—that's sign that the circus is resting. Let's go into the dressing-room."

As a rule I was put to bed on a small trunk where father kept his capes which were adorned with glittering beads and artificial jewels, his fluffy collars and ruffs. Father sat down at the table and made something out of a stick. I guessed he was going to use it in the sea lions' act. Mother tidied the costumes.

"But what am I going to perform in, Mummy?" I asked.

"In a tutu most likely. We'll tie a ribbon in your plaits and decorate your shoes with shiny beads."

"We're having none of that!" father angrily turned to us. "She's not a ballerina, you know."

"But Yuri, she's a little girl!" mother stressed.

"So what? I don't want any tutus. She's tough and there's nothing girlish about her. She's a regular tomboy. You, mother, must make

her a costume which is an exact copy of mine. That'll look funny — she'll be Durov in miniature. I once performed with her granddad like that. And no fancy shoes — do you hear — everything must be just like mine."

Hearing their soft, even whisper, I began dozing off. Father and mother were dreaming about my opening night. They were only worried about Starry. One day, however, I woke up from a push. Something wrapped in a blanket was lying still beside me.

"Mum..."

"Sleep, Natasha."

"Who's this?"

"It's a present for you from Starry!" Mother opened the corner of the blanket and I caught sight of a tiny pony which was slightly bigger than my dog.

"Oh, the baby! The little darling!" I stretched towards it. A trustful, uncomprehending eye looked at me and then lowered its long eyelashes.

"So, you've already got acquainted!" father joyfully bent over me. "She's yours. You'll train her yourself. I already started working professionally when I was eight. Your grandfather, Natasha, was very kind but I've never met a more enraged person if anyone offended the animals. 'Yuri must know how to do everything himself,' he said. 'If he looks after the animals with a nurse maid, he might get his head bitten off.'

"We lived at that time in old Bozhedomka Street," father said. "Everything in it was special and everything in the house was connected with the circus. There was also a menagerie in the house. From the early morning Granddad and I bustled about the cages and we would have probably forgotten all about meals if it hadn't been for Granny. She was our sunshine. She warmed us with her affection and advice and quietly helped us in all our work. Granddad and I adored and feared her. She never scolded anyone and nobody remembers her raising her voice. But she had the knack of being able to detect lies, falsehood and guilt at once. Granddad had his own principles of upbringing."

I listened to father although I didn't understand everything he said. What did principles mean? But I didn't ask because I was afraid of interrupting the story.

"We sat down to dinner. Well, of course, there were always guests. There wasn't a day when the family was just by itself. I was the youngest Durov and sat to the left of my father at the table. He would say: 'While you're young, you're only my favourite but when you grow up you'll become my assistant and then you'll be what is most dear to me—my golden right hand. You'll then sit here between your mother and me!' I waited for this moment. I wanted to snuggle up closer to my mother but when they would sit down at the table I was only allowed to ask for the salt. That was how a child had to behave among adults. Your granddad started up a conversation with the guests and got carried away. I was forgotten about. I looked at my empty plate and then transferred my gaze to your Granny who signalled to me to be patient for a little while. That was hard. I caught the right moment and said in a serious tone: 'Pass the salt, please!' Everyone smiled. My plate was filled and Granddad happily listened to his guests.

" 'Well, I must say, Yuri's your spitting image. He likes a joke!' one of the guests remarked.

"One day after shooting a film your Granddad and I arrived home and for the first time I sat down on his right-hand side. We were being filmed together. Granny joyfully served up my dinner immediately after Granddad's but less than a week later my right hand was covered with blisters from cleaning and tidying the cages and wasn't golden at all. The wolf was to blame. I got hold of some bronze paint, gilted my right hand with it and went to the menagerie with some lads.

"I'm not afraid of anyone: I've got a magic golden hand.

"I went and poked my hand out to all the animals. Some licked it, others sniffed it, snorted and moved away but the wolf... The wolf didn't want to come out of its corner. I got a stick and began poking at it. It bristled up—it wasn't used to being treated this way. It got up, came over to the bars and snarled. I offered him my hand: I pretended I wasn't afraid of the old grey wolf! Then it grabbed me. The next moment my thumb was dangling on a bit of flesh. I ran upstairs. Granny turned pale and got out the iodine and bandages... Granddad came after me.

" 'Oh, you little horror! You'll ruin my animals! I'll show you!!!' "

"I caught it hot then. For a whole month while my thumb healed,

Granddad didn't want to see me. I then thought that Granny was the only one I had in the world. I got better and the bandages were removed. My finger looked completely different. Look, Natasha, you see what it became like... And Granddad said to me: 'That's a lesson to you, Yuri. You'll be able to tell the difference between what's gold and what isn't. That's important. Love animals—they're your life and work. Understand them and then you won't have to gilt your hand with make-up. The gold in them, you little blockhead, will flow in their veins.' Understand animals and love them—that's what I'm telling you now. It wasn't for nothing, you know, that you were given Starry's present. Do you understand?" father finished.

He was happy that day.

Chapter V

Starry's present was named Baby. My rehearsals began. I liked to feed Starry. I would stretch out my hand with some bread and salt, and Starry ate. Baby was growing fast. He already ran behind me round the ring. If you blew in his ear, he shook his head as if saying: "Don't, don't..."

"Baby, Baby, are you going to obey me?" I asked the foal, at the same time pretending I wanted to blow in his ear. Baby shook his head. "Oh, you don't want to obey me—get down on your knees this minute!" I gently tapped Baby's forelegs with a twig and he went down on his knees at once.

I bent over him and with some sugar in my hand made him stretch his head forward. Baby was still slow-witted and when he

reached for the sugar, sawdust was sticking to his fluffy lips but I carefully removed it.

Now Chizhik sat for hours beside me. He found it interesting. Sometimes I went to his rehearsals, too. His were much more difficult than mine. We were different performers. He was an acrobat and I was a trainer. I understood in my own way how our work was different. An acrobat had to make himself do the tricks and trainer had to make his charges do them. But it seemed to me much harder to make oneself jump accurately or turn a somersault than make Baby go down on his knees. That's why beads of sweat never broke out on my forehead during a rehearsal and I felt happy at them more often than Chizhik. Chizhik, however, thought differently.

"Natasha, you know, I'll be patient, too. Only don't laugh, I've decided to watch you."

Poor Baby! That day he didn't get any sugar or return to Starry on time and, to crown it all, for the first time in his four months of life, he tried to kick me.

"Chizhik, please don't watch me," I implored. "You see, Baby is still young. I can see you're watching but he can't. That's why we're reacting differently at the rehearsal."

"What difference does that make? After all, he's a pony! How strange!" Chizhik exclaimed in surprise.

"Oh, you're wrong there! Training means being together and understanding the animals like yourself. When Baby's in pain, so am I and when he's happy, I am, too."

"Oh, you are silly! Do you mean he talks to you, then?"

"Yes."

"Rubbish! No animals except for parrots know how to talk," Chizhik said confidently.

"A parrot is a bird because it has wings. Animals don't have wings but they do know how to talk. Do you want me to show you? Let's go to Lilly."

The elephants' stables smelt of hay. Piccolo the donkey was huddling near Lilly rubbing his back against the elephant's leg as if it were a tree trunk. Holding hands, Chizhik and I stopped by the elephant.

"Speak to us, Lilly!" and I offered some sugar to Lilly. She

swallowed it in a trice and made a strange sound like a sigh but her eyes looked kindly and tenderly at us. I confidently translated what she had said to Chizhik: "She says thank you."

I thought Chizhik would burst out laughing but his mouth gaped open as if he wanted to say something: "Do it again, Natasha! Go on!"

"Chizhik, you know, they talk in all sorts of ways but you can best understand them by looking at their eyes. The ones which have kind eyes never screw them up. Why do they need to hide their kindness?"

"Hide?"

"Well, look. You see, I'm looking at you through my eyelashes."

"As if you're asleep."

"That's right but if I'm not I'm cheating you and simply watching you on the sly. I'm like a leopard or a wolf, a beast of prey. Eyelashes are like a fence, Chizhik. Look, Lilly has got very thin ones. She can't hide behind them but Baby has got very long fine ones which, like a fan, protect him from the dust and heat. And the leopard has thick, spiky ones like a lampshade behind which he hides his cunning and viciousness so they aren't too noticeable."

"How did you come to know all this?"

"Mummy told me. And then there's our Kalavushka! If you only knew how marvellous Kalavushka is. He lives with Granny at Durov's Pets Corner in Moscow. Kalavushka's rhino bird. I can tell you all about him myself. He's got simply huge eyelashes, and they get longer in a funny way: first little spikes stick out which, you know, bristle, as if they've been smeared with mascara. Then the spike turns out to be a little cape in which the eyelash is kept and after a while hatches. Understand what I mean?"

"First of all, you mean pokes out not hatches, and secondly, there's no such thing as a rhino bird."

"Yes, there is. Honest!" I heatedly grabbed Chizhik by his jacket. But Lilly lowered her trunk and drew me to her. Chizhik jumped aside.

"Yes, there is, there is, there is! And Kalavushka lives in our house. Yes..." I kept repeating, swinging high on the trunk and looking triumphantly down at Chizhik.

"Natasha! Natasha!" mother called to me.

"I'm here with Lilly!"

"Come to the dressing-room."

Forgetting about Chizhik, I rushed like the wind to the dressing-room. That day, you see, I was to try on my new costume. It was an exact copy of father's.

My neck was drowned in the ruff which looked like a flower. Mother had embroidered "Natalia Durova" in shiny beads on the waist band and the cape was dark blue with gold stars.

"Well, mother, stand us side by side!" said father joyfully. "Not a bad toy, I'd say!"

"What do you mean 'toy', Daddy?" I couldn't help asking.

"You and I are like two dolls. You had one like us — a big wooden doll with a nest of similar smaller ones inside. I'm the biggest and you're the smallest. Today you'll rehearse in your new things. It's best for the ponies to get used to the costume now."

It was an unusual rehearsal. The circus was empty except for a few of my surprised-looking friends who were sitting in the director's box.

"Why do you keep smiling when you look up?" father asked.

"I can see Nonna, Chizhik and all the boys and girls there!"

"Try smiling at the front row!"

"But there's no one there, Daddy. The seats are empty."

"That doesn't matter."

I forced a smile and looked sadly towards the front row.

"There's no doubt about it — a little artist's in the making. Who on earth smiles like that? I'm not making you drink codliver oil." Daddy pulled a sour face and I started giggling happily.

"That's how you should smile. Now for the last trick: get Baby."

My charge galloped out from behind the curtain like a butting bullock.

"You won't let me down, will you?"

"No!" Baby shook his head.

"Then say 'hello' to our friends!"

Baby dropped on to his knees and then jumped up, shoved its face at my new costume and suddenly began gleefully to chew my starry cape.

"Go away!" I shouted in despair. "Daddy, he's spoiling my costume!"

Father was busy talking to somebody. Then I offered a carrot

to Baby and following it, he ran with me into the wings.

The next day was Sunday, the première and the first time I would enter the ring as an artist. It was going to be a big day for me.

And so my big day began. I stood with mother by the curtain. Animals were hurrying to and from the ring... My ponies were brought and at last the curtain swung open and father led me out by the hand. There was a huge audience and wherever I turned there were eyes watching me and I blinked from the light. Then I began to make out hats which looked like bright spots and soon lots of people's faces came into focus. I looked round and there were people everywhere but father had disappeared. The ponies were cantering round the ring. I tried to look at my ponies but I was paralysed with fear. I mechanically did everything correctly like at the rehearsals. I thought the ponies were moving too slowly. People to the left, right and in front of me were laughing. The doves and ponies finally disappeared and Baby cantered out. He stopped by me and looked expectantly at me but I kept silent. Then Baby impatiently shoved his tender, moist lips into my hands but I kept silent. Then he started chewing my cape. I pushed him off, crying and rubbing away my tears, which were orange from the carrot. Daddy came up and explained something to the audience, lifted Baby and me into his arms and carried us into the wings.

Mother took me to the dressing-room. I was shaking all over. Tears were pouring from my eyes but I wasn't crying.

"What's the matter, Natasha? Were you frightened? It'll pass. Calm down." Mother put me on the trunk and Baby breathed warmly on my back in the corner. The ceiling above us was rumbling. I could hear trampling feet. The performance was over and the audience was leaving the circus. I shuddered every time the ceiling rumbled.

"Mummy, Mummy!"

"Sssh! Daddy's coming," mother whispered to me.

I huddled in a ball.

"Well, my young artist, are you hiding?" Father's face looked confused and kind. "Well done, Natasha! Everything went splendidly. Did you hear how you were applauded? Now the people in the audience are going about and saying that a wonderful young star has appeared in the circus."

I tensely listened to father's voice and believed him! I listened out for footsteps on the ceiling. I could still hear them which meant it was true! Father was pleased. Mother took Baby out of the dressing-room. Father sat down by me on the trunk. I stretched out my arms and hugged him.

"So, you're an artiste now! Now go to sleep this minute. I'll cover you: we've got lots to do this evening."

"Is the day really already over, Mummy?" She nodded to me from the doorway. "Mummy, you know, you said it was going to be a big day but it's been short." I sobbed for the last time, already tired and calm.

"It was a big one for your heart!" father explained. "That's why you'll remember it. But there's something else I must tell you: both you and I are now bread-winners in the family. You must understand, Natasha, the ring's like the palm of my hand: you can see everything in it and if you're a true artist, it'll gladly show up all the best in you but if you're a cry-baby and a coward, it'll clench up tightly and turn you into sawdust."

At the age of five I was very much afraid of turning into sawdust.

Chapter VI

Father used to forget that I was a child, so everyone said. He no longer comforted me after every performance. He either looked disapprovingly at me, afraid in mother's presence to tell me everything that was seething inside him, or tried not to notice me at all. And I knew that he was demanding a great deal of me. I tried to keep close to mother and asked her to play with me.

One day my mother said to my father: "Today I want you to take Natasha to the theatre. She's never been to a puppet-show."

When I saw the Snow Queen and the other fairy-tale characters, I became very excited, shrieked, clapped my hands and, as I couldn't see their blank staring eyes, I forgot that the puppets weren't real. They talked, moved and looked life-like. The stage was full of life. Father seemed to share the happy and sad moments with me but most of the time he studied me carefully and I could feel this.

I can't remember how many days afterwards I spent with the Snow Queen! I acted the part of Gerda in front of Chizhik with a real deer, stroking its soft, delicate cheek. Its quick watchful eyes weren't afraid of me. As I narrated and acted scenes from the fairy-tale about the Snow Queen, she suddenly came to life for Chizhik, Nonna and Slavik then and there in the circus. The stables made a natural stage and all the fairy-tale characters, the deer and even the crow, came alive. Father looked on, laughed and cheered up after my performance of the Snow Queen.

"Mother, you know, Natasha takes after me so much. Look how well she acts! She's a real little professional," father said enthusiastically.

"Yes, but do you know why she's so tense in the ring?" They were sitting together on the trunk, talking heatedly. My family was finding my work in the ring hard-going: father became sharper and little wrinkles formed in the corners of mother's mouth.

"There's a lot you don't understand, Yuri! She's still like plasticine which you should mould and not cut to bits. You can't expect her to inherit your skill and talent at once just because she's your daughter. Look how sensitive you are with the animals. You give them everything you've got."

"How can I explain things to you, mother? With Natasha I'm both a father and an artist. Her blunders are harder for me to take than my own. She's green in her work in the ring before an audience and I can't understand why. Can you?"

"She's five years old," mother said reproachfully.

"Natasha, come here!"

My heart pounding, I came up to my father.

"Would you like to stroll round the circus with me?"

We went to Lilly. Father was holding a stick on which there were two thin broom twigs. He tickled her trunk with them. Lilly cautiously moved away. Father tossed the stick and Lilly immediately caught it with her trunk and snapped it against her leg.

"You're frightening her?" I was surprised but tried to work out what father was doing.

"I want to show you a trick."

"A real one?"

"In a way. Elephants are afraid of all small animals such as mice and rats and even an ordinary broom frightens Lilly. And so I worked out I could set two things right at one go. If Lilly breaks the twig on this stick, it means she's not afraid of the stick — that's the first thing and secondly, we've got a new trick: an elephant mathematician. We'll put eight sticks in a row. I'll ask Lilly what two times two is and she'll work it out and hand me four sticks. But what about three times three? We've only got eight sticks, you see. Lilly suddenly displays her quick brain and breaks the eighth stick in half. It's a good trick, isn't it? In the ring it really is a trick but you understand it all now. You've stopped confiding in me, you know."

"Daddy!" I rushed towards him but Lilly's trunk swept round me quicker. Father began to look happy. Lilly embraced us both and I felt so wonderfully happy that I became calmer.

"What do you feel, Natasha, when you go out into the ring before an audience?"

"I feel afraid of you, Daddy."

"Why?! I don't hit you, do I? No, never. Do I force you to do it? No. I want you to be just like grandfather and I. It was you yourself, don't forget, who wanted to become an artist."

"It's not that, Daddy!" I searched for a way to express the feelings overwhelming me.

Yes, I was afraid of my father. I was afraid how he'd greet me and behave towards me after performances. And I was green! That meant something was wrong — I wasn't ripe yet! And what about the audience? You see, I couldn't see them properly and felt afraid of them, too. I could explain that: I took father into the dressing-room where there was a cage partitioned by a thick wire net. A mon-

key was sitting in each section. They first sat and stared at, and got used to each other, and then the wire net was removed and the lively monkeys became friends.

"So, you haven't got used to the audience yet?"

"Daddy, all the time it's either rushing towards me or it's far away like in your binoculars."

"You've grown up. You hardly seem like a child," Father said seriously. "Which one of us is right? Neither. I'm a grown-up but sometimes I feel as happy as a child at my work and you're very young but become sad and feel therefore just like a grown-up. Zina, help us!"

Mother looked puzzled.

"Has something happened?" she asked in alarm.

"Not happened but happening. Natasha is being born for the second time."

"My dears, you've both worn me out. You are both so much alike and both so difficult. You're up to something again, aren't you? Come on, tell me all about it."

We both confusedly confided in mother.

"That'll do! You, Yuri, as her father and the head of the family, should know better than to brag and wildly imagine that the child is special and feels and thinks at the age of six like you at thirty. Oh, a wonder of nature, indeed! And you, Natasha, can run and play games with Chizhik and Nonna and get some skipping-ropes and prove to Daddy that we've got a normal six-year-old daughter. Go on! I'm sick of seeing the glum face of this wonder of nature. Off you go!"

However, I stood stock-still. Father was angry. He huffed and scowled and turned away from mother and left the monkeys' cage in silence. I went after him. We strode down the performers' exit towards the ring. There was a mirror on the wall. Our reflections were caught in it. Father and I look like dolls even out of the ring. So now we have them on the make-up table under our photos: father's doll is small and mine large.

"That was the first time she's brushed us aside," father complained to me. "And the main thing is she didn't want to understand. It's strange! Mother, who's always so calm, flew into a temper."

"Yes," I agreed.

"Alright, so she's sick of us but there's a performance in two hours' time, you know, and look what condition we're both in. My hands are shaking."

I looked at my hands.

"Mine aren't," I sighed regretfully.

For an instant my father's eyes sparkled and a smile was about to light up in them.

Then my father began to object again: "You see, when I cry beside an animal who's lost its life, mother always stays by my side. She doesn't find it amusing that a man is sobbing and ready to confide his grief in absolutely any stranger who comes along: Lotus, the sea lion is no more. Mind you, a good animal has perished and so has my work. Just try and get it back! It takes years to train an animal and Lotus had all the qualities of an outstanding actor and Lark isn't half as good. When mother's by my side, I always have some hope. Today she behaved mercilessly with us. Without understanding anything, she said whatever came into her head. She's fed up with us. So you..."

I now felt sorry for father. But I couldn't get angry with my mother because I believed in her and loved her too much. And when the soft strains of the untuned circus piano sounded above us, father and I at once stopped talking so as not to frighten away the delicate, melancholy tune which was so different from the humming voices and booming circus music. Father lifted me into his arms and we started whispering:

"If you feel stifled, look at once for a vent of fresh air. That will help. My vent is the animals, mother's is music, what's yours?"

"Mother!" I exclaimed and an echo at once resounded under the circus top above us and we heard: "So there my trainers are at last!"

The three of us were now standing by the curtain.

"I've unravelled what's making you upset. What's the Durovs' method of training? It's supposed to be the most humane. Without causing the animal pain or frightening it with whips and sticks. It is by being sensitive and kind the animal is turned into an actor." She was talking to my father. "You, Yuri, have always been delighted to see that the ring is great fun for the animals. So, you should realise that Natasha is a child who needs to be educated or, in your terms, trained. So train her, then," mother joked.

"But she's afraid of me and feels no contact with the audience. She withdraws into herself in the ring."

"That'll pass with time. If you acquaint her with the audience, take her closer and give her a chance to feel the atmosphere and hear people talking, it'll pass."

It became happy again in our circus home and I laughed and played with mother, Nonna and Chizhik. After the Sunday matinée performances father stayed behind with the spectators and discussed training methods with them and I showed them my Baby. Sometimes we sat among them and sometimes we walked about in the foyer. I watched the audience and they no longer seemed strangers. They felt happy, sat still in excitement and applauded because they loved my circus home. I wasn't afraid of going into the ring. The shroud of mist had lifted long ago from my eyes. Each time I got to know the new spectators and tried to keep their attention for a little while. I learnt how to respond to their smiles and hide Baby's blunders; I was sometimes angry when one of my doves, not wanting to obey me, suddenly took wing, soaring faster and faster and landed on one of the trapezes. Although I was still young, I was becoming professional. I finally had to undergo a test: I was to take part in the May Day parade. The circus filed along in a procession. The motocyclists roared along and the acrobats, jugglers and clowns rode on lorries and floats. We brought up the rear. Father walked ahead with Mirza and I followed with Lilly and Piccolo. When I grew tired Lilly lifted me onto her trunk. I looked down upon the moving stream of people. The scarves and hats merged into a colourful bouquet like the spectators' rows of seats at the circus. A balloon was floating above my head.

"Lilly! I want that balloon!"

Lilly caught the string with her trunk and drew the balloon towards me. Father and Mirza were walking slowly. Suddenly there was a bang and instead of the balloon I was holding onto a piece of wrinkled dark-green rubber. The bang was only caused by the burst balloon but Mirza dashed forwards, dragging father after her. They overtook one car after another and passed the May Day stands. Father could only wave his hand. He kept up with Mirza and shouted anxiously and firmly: "Back! Get back!"

It was as though Mirza had gone crazy. Father threw himself

across her path. The elephant stopped dead. Shouts of "stop" passed along the procession and like a train jolting and bolting, the animal cavalcade began to stop. I was right in front of the stands. Hurrah, Lilly! I waved my arm, copying my father and Lilly curled her trunk above her head, letting out a loud triumphant cry. I bowed to the applause. Lilly lifted me onto her trunk and responding to my command, gently trotted across the square.

"Thank you for being quick-witted, for your self-control and for being a true artist!" father hugged me and kissed my eyes, eyebrows, hair and even bows. He was so happy and mother was smiling through her tears.

"Natasha, how happy we are!" Mother knelt before me, straightening my crumpled costume and drooping bow. "Congratulate Daddy. He's been awarded the title of Merited Artiste. We're going to Moscow for a couple of days. Let's get ready quick. We're leaving today..."

We travelled by train. During the trip father told me about his childhood. I kept on wanting to laugh but I coughed instead and after having a thermometre popped into my mouth, I was found to have a high temperature. My high spirits vanished and mother's face clouded again with worry, fatigue and alarm.

At Granny's house in Moscow we looked at the leather case containing father's award which was called the Order of the Red Banner of Labour. Father always wore the metal-engraved award so that everyone would know that there were labour award-winners at the circus, too. I wanted to talk about everything but it hurt me to talk. I had very bad tonsillitis. One sometimes gets just a sore throat but when it is called by a special name, it really is serious. I wore a warm scarf around my neck. I wanted to be with Granny all the time. I was sad that Granny was seeing me in a plain camel-wool scarf and not a ruff. We sat down to eat and I was given a real treat as my reward. Father sat next to Granny in my grandfather Durov's place and I sat on my father's right side. I was now considered a real artist by the family.

"Yes, Yuri! I'm very happy. You see, we've now got two merited artistes in the family: your father, Vladimir Durov and you, Yuri Durov." Granny's lips quivered and her wonderful large eyes became deep and tender as she looked at father.

"But what about me? What about me, Granny?" I kept croaking, winning over part of Granny's attention.

"You? Why, we've got two artists with awards and one with a cold at the moment. Let's hope that it won't last for more than a couple of weeks." And Granny tied Grandfather's satin ribbon over my scarf, the one on which he had worn his awards for many years.

Chapter VII

We were waiting for father one morning in Tsvetnoi Boulevard. He had gone to the circus' central board to be issued instructions, or, to be more precise, to be given a sheet of paper on which the name of a town was written. In this case, it was Alma Ata. And so we went to Kazakhstan. On long journeys we travelled on a goods train and father looked after the sea lions himself. I liked these journeys very much. The two elephants, Piccolo the donkey, the lama and our dogs—Slonik, an African terrier and my mongrel, Maika—were loaded into a wooden carriage. They were given the best places and we three—father, mother and I—settled ourselves in the hay in a corner. Mother cleverly arranged our home on wheels. The walls were made of square bales of pressed hay and there was even a tiny window which was curtained with light, rustling starched gauze. We made a table out of suitcases and plywood boards and covered the hay with a horse-cloth so that it was just like a sofa. There was even a night-lamp above it which was fitted to the battery from father's car. On the journey the puffs of smoke, discordant whistles and shouts of venders at the stations

all added to the fun. The baked milk covered with pink skin in an earthenware pot, the aromatic roasted chickens straight from the oven, radishes, turnips and omelettes and coffee which mother made on paraffin stove tasted especially delicious under the rattle of train wheels.

Very early in the morning when the first hazy ray of sunlight poured through the window which was almost on the same level as the carriage's ceiling, I would stretch out my hands and the two small holes of a trunk would at once appear from under the gauze.

"Good morning, Lilly!" I smiled at the trunk.

"Time to get up, Natasha, time to get up!" father ordered with his eyes still closed.

We washed and my father looked at Mirza and sighed: "No doubt about it, she's growing, our little elephant's growing. Look, her back's already rubbing against the roof."

"Yes," mother agreed, "I remember I once saw a picture of the world resting on whales, elephants and other such animals. Mirza now looks as if she's from this picture and is supporting the whole train on her back. Oh, how proud and important she looks and she's even become quieter. Breakfast time, dears: omelette for Natasha, coffee and sandwiches for Daddy and eight loaves of bread for the elephants."

"And what about Piccolo," I added.

"We don't have to worry about him. Look," mother gave a loaf to Lilly who broke it and then shared it with Piccolo.

"Lilly, my lovely good girlie!" In a surge of tenderness I felt like rushing towards her but father stopped me.

"Don't you dare disturb her. You'll make her angry and then you'll have to face the consequences. The elephants are having breakfast so you mustn't disturb them."

"But what will she do to me?"

"She'll make mince-meat out of you like this." Father picked me up in his arms and buried me in the hay. "One, two, three and you've disappeared."

"That's not true!" I shouted and hid behind Lilly's leg.

Father didn't have any more time for me. He was nervously wondering if we'd soon have to change trains or whether another engine would be hitched onto the train. He hurriedly went off to

water the sea lions. You see, when they travelled in cages, they were sprayed with a hose two or three times a day. Their expressive eyes pleaded for water.

We arrived at a station and the doors were opened. Father jumped out of the carriage and then two trunks stretched towards the fresh air, followed by a donkey's head.

"Look, there's a zoo on board," a pointsman stopped in amazement.

A long stop turned into a short show which father proudly called: "Circus on the Stage!" But there wasn't really a stage; only a platform with props. The impromptu performances always took place on it: Nora, a black Doberman and father's favourite canine mathematician, two dancing pink pelicans, Bebe, the brown bear and the light, agile martens, Max and Moritz. Everyone enjoyed the performance: for the spectators it was a spectacular show, for father it was work and joy which could in a small way fill the tiring days without rehearsals and for the animals it was a chance to limber up. But what about me? For me it meant dozens of adventures which always occurred in one or other of the unusually filled carriages.

It meant new acquaintances; it meant seeing our country—its fields, lakes, forests, meadows and rivers. It meant the bunch of wild flowers I picked myself by the railway track. I loved travelling and longed to get going as soon as possible.

"Mummy, where are we off to? How are we travelling?" I pestered mother.

We were sitting on a bench in Tsvetnoi Boulevard by the circus.

"To somewhere far away you can't see from here."

Mother was tired of answering my questions. Father had been gone a very long time.

"Mum, why are circuses always next to a market?" I kept on.

"They're not always. Only the very old ones are. In the old days they used to consider that circuses should be erected in places where there were a lot of people. Otherwise, the season would be a flop, there'd be no money and people would go hungry. They looked upon markets in just the same way as circuses."

"The market is full of people!" I looked at the gates of the Central Market nearby. A stream of people was flowing leisurely and

smoothly through them. They went in with all sorts of bags which were empty and flat and came out of the market with them, stuffed full of splendid, brightly-coloured fruit and vegetables. People passed by us, too: some walking leisurely, some briskly and other slowly strolling along with children. Mother screwed up her eyes at the sun and I counted the passers-by and got as far as forty-five.

Father still hadn't appeared. And then suddenly there was a commotion and a stir. It was as if a magnet was gathering people into crowds. A huge wave of people gushed out of the circus and ran from the boulevard to Trubnaya Square.

"Natasha, something's happened. Something very dangerous!" Mother pulled me by the hand and we hurried towards the circus.

"Yuri!" mother pressed against father. "What's happened?"

"War, Zina!" father said.

He was holding an instruction sheet in his hand. I took it and read the word "Smolensk" on it. We walked along the streets. Crowds of anxious-looking people were standing by the tall posts with black loud-speakers. Father hurried us along but mother walked slowly that day as if she was carrying something heavy. At home everything was topsy-turvy. We hunted for father's rucksack and then mother packed it as though father was leaving us forever.

"...Especially Lilly. She's got a weak heart. Make sure the elepnants are fed regularly, and as for the sea lions, look after them the same way as usual. Tell Isaak Babutin to give the easiest items on the programme to Natasha. She can even perform with the elephants but then you or Isaak will have to keep an eye on Mirza. I'm not worried about Lilly. The bears, the cheetah and 'The Hunter's Dream' are in Isaak's hands," father gave orders. He had volunteered for the front and we were seeing him off. We arrived at the Lenin District military enlistment office.

"Is this the front, Mummy?" I whispered softly.

"No, Natasha. Daddy's got to wait for instructions again here, but they're not to do with work. Daddy's going off to the war."

Mother and I were like a little island, like many many others that hadn't yet merged; unlike those right by the building, with tears, grief, and the harmonica playing. Over there people were already crying, saying good-bye and the enlisted men were singing

and playing accordions, and around us people were going through the agony of waiting to be called up to war.

"Mummy! Daddy's come out!" I yelled, rushing into the crowd. Father's tall figure vanished for an instant and then appeared before us. We slowly went home.

"Why aren't I going with them? Why am I to serve on the home front? Explain that to me, Zina!" Father was confused and embittered.

"It means that's what's best. Everyone has his own front." Mother's firm voice and the new expression in her eyes had an effect on father.

"That's just about what they said: You're needed here more. We'll have to take the first train to Smolensk."

The station was clouded with bluish cigarette smoke. The passengers weren't dressed in bright clothes and bustling about as usual. You could only see uniforms everywhere and hear the dull thud of marching. That day the atmosphere at the station was more serious and on the platform, tenser. The platforms were full of dull greyish green army coats. All the trains were going to the front!

The war left its imprint on every home. I remember the white-walled, low buildings in Smolensk, their windows marked with paper crosses, the howling sirens and the booming sound of nearby explosions. The enemy's planes, whose flights were like a circus act, circled high in the sky and suddenly dived towards the ground, as if falling from a trapeze and swept over the stream of stunned people, enjoying the wild chase.

Before the performance father took me with him to stand by the entrance. He was nervous. July flowers were in bloom in some people's gardens near the circus.

"Why needs all this now? Flowers, circuses. How ridiculous they seem now and how out of keeping with one's mood. Now only those dreadful black flower-like loudspeakers attract one's attention." Father looked at the loudspeaker attached to a pillar. Its harsh noises were alarming. Later I found out and felt what father had been talking to me about. Yes, this loudspeaker could only be pictured in two colours in one's mind's eye: black for hatred and red for victory.

Now only the faces on the posters smiled happily but, you see, they had been put up ten days ago — that is, before the war broke

out. The artists' faces were quite different and even in the ring the heavy pulse of those tense days made itself felt. But people did come to the circus. They came to rest and prepare themselves for the long journey ahead.

The front was approaching. We could tell it was getting nearer by the explosions, shell-holes and wrecked houses. Our Lilly became a watch-guard. She went with father to do some new work. She was used as transport to help evacuate a kindergarten and clear away destroyed houses, finding and rescuing the living under the debris. One day she put out an incendiary bomb in the circus yard. While sand was being brought to extinguish it, Lilly calmly filled her trunk with water and, as if she had a fire hose, put out the bomb.

Father and Lilly became unseparable. The elephant and her trainer went everywhere together. And then the following happened. During the performance there was a difficult double balance act. A horizontal bar, not fastened to anything, was placed on six pedestals, one-meter-high each. Father lay half-way along the bar and Lilly had to carefully walk over him. The nerve-racking strains of music added to the suspense of the act. Suddenly a siren screeched, the elephant stopped dead with its leg raised, the lights went out in the circus and a commotion broke out in the audience.

Mother huddled against the curtain.

"What's going to happen?" her lips murmured. "Father will fall. Yes, they'll both fall and then..."

"Then" sounded dreadful... I knew that then I wouldn't have a father but if only Lilly fell, that would be the end, too. Mother and I were so tense, we didn't notice the light flash on or hear the music and jerky applause.

Sensitive, clever Lilly had saved father's life. In the darkness she had completed her act so silently and gently that even father hadn't felt her feet quickly pass over him. When the light flashed on Lilly was at the other end of the bar.

Lilly became a member of our family.

The next morning we were ordered to take the animals at once out of the town for they were also valuable state property.

A train was put at our disposal but we didn't know how were we going to get the animals to the station as the only means of

transport was a rickety lorry in which fodder was brought to the animals.

And again Lilly, Mirza, the camel and even my ponies set to work and took the props and cages to the station on their backs and humps and in carts. The strangely loaded procession of animals moved along with a crowd of people who were no less weighed down. The station was already only a stone's throw away when the bombing started again. Father's voice was hoarse from urging us on. The animals kept shying. "Come on, do you hear!" Lilly led the procession. Three fascist planes were flying above us. They came so close I thought I could see the pilot. He was smiling, no, he was leering and his eyes were screwed up like a cheetah's.

The bullets whistled shrilly through the air.

"Mummy, Baby!"

I was leading the frisky little pony who suddenly wheezed and collapsed onto the ground. Beside him the lama strangely stretched out its neck which the ginger-haired circus boy, Vasya, was holding. Vasya's arm was crushed by the metal frame of the circus pool which had collapsed and Vasya disappeared.

I screamed and tore out of mother's strong arms.

"Quick, quick, Natasha!" mother dragged me along. I lagged behind and wanted to stay with Baby.

We had a dreadful, restless journey in the tightly packed goods train. I had nightmares and spoke deliriously.

"Baby!" I kept repeating, still seeing her forelock of hair tossed in the wind and the leering pilot.

"Daddy! He killed Vasya and Baby and laughed?!" I shuddered and wanted father to comfort me. "He wounded Lilly's legs and laughed? Daddy, Daddy," I sobbed. "Is he human?" I asked, not because I was plagued by a child's curiosity but because I wanted to know once and for all if a person could do such a thing.

"He's a fascist! He's the most vile, most hideous beast of prey—he's a 'laughing' hyena!" father sadly explained to me with disgust.

Chapter VIII

Chelyabinsk, Magnitogorsk, Novosibirsk, Zlatoust, Ufa, Sverdlovsk — town after town, the circus worked without a break. We directed all our efforts to help the front. That meant three performances would earn a tank and twelve, an airplane. Games and dolls disappeared from my childhood. Life itself forced me to see everything around clearly, at times harshly and never as a child. I knew what it meant to be evacuated and I met refugees and even that sheet of paper which brought irreparable grief was imprinted in my heart forever. That sheet of paper was an army notification of death.

As a rule it arrived in the mornings and was silently brought across the foyer and stables to the dressing-rooms where the messenger lingered and could not bring himself to hand it to the person it was meant for. Dressing-room No. 4 Miltons and Zapashnys. Here was Auntie Lida, the mother of my friend, Nonna. The mother and her three children, Nonna and two younger brothers are all here together. Thin Auntie Lida, dressed in her silver streamline costume stood motionlessly, looking at everyone inquiringly, distrustfully and desperately. Gasping, she asked: "Who is it? My husband or my son? Oh, my dear husband!" Auntie Lida pressed against the sheet of paper as if it was part of the person whose name was carried in an echo through all the circus.

Two hours later a poster on a tripod was standing in the ring. The photo in the left-hand corner of the poster was edged with black crepe and a silent handful of artists took their leave of a friend who had died a valiant death in battle. Long-legged Nonna in a short dress kissed and hugged her brothers who were bitterly weeping and were afraid to look at the black cavernous passageway. Nonna's eyes were wide open, her lips pursed and large tears rolled down her cheeks. The circus was stricken with grief.

Then I recall how Nonna, her brothers and I were in our dressing-

room and all four of us huddled under a horse-cloth to keep ourselves warm. Nonna was speaking about her father and Slavik listened attentively to what she was telling us.

"Our Daddy had a gold tie and red lips!" he said.

Slavik was little and only vaguely remembered his broad-shouldered father who was a brilliant artist and the head of the act. His memories were like the poster from which his silver-clad father always smiled down at him.

Auntie Lida was in the next room. She had to be alone now because the performance was shortly to begin and she had to work.

"Mummy Zina, it's time for me to change," Nonna shyly said and my mother sympathetically took us into the next dressing-room.

Auntie Lida was sitting by the mirror. Her face was covered with bright, gay make-up. Only two deep wrinkles by her lips stood out like two thick, pink stripes and they were like little grooves clogged up with make-up.

"So here you are! Well, line up, Nonna and boys."

Auntie Lida was holding some trousers. She crumpled them for a second, closed her eyes, sighed, and took scissors and a tape-measure.

"I'm going to make two suits out of your father's trousers for you to work in. You're going to work. Stand still, Slavik, and don't move."

Mother and I quietly left the dressing-room.

"You see, Natasha, they're both going to take their father's place."

We were all doing our share of work. We travelled to factories and mills. I performed with my father and then became acquainted with the spectators. I met some who were just a little older than me who had come to the factories to do relief work.

A great many people filled my circus home at that time and I had many impressions. The circus was in the midst of them and, of course, I gained a new understanding of life and new interests.

For instance, I came to love poetry at this time. Natalia Konchalovskaya aroused this love in me. Wartime brought the poetess and us together and an extraordinary sense of pride for resonant Russian poetry was felt in the circus where it was read every night in the ring like on a stage. The beautiful big woman with glowing eyes brought joy and new interest to the every-day life of the

circus. Thanks to her the quality of our performances improved.

Father's act was called "The Hunter's Dream". Father cantered out into the ring on a black horse, fired his gun, and the pigeons, flying in from all directions, perched on it. They weren't afraid of the hunter and if requested, flew into the game-bag themselves. It was only an amusing act. Natalia Konchalovskaya turned it into a show of its own. A pack of borzoi hounds dozing by a fence were frightened away by a bear. Clumsy Bebe lay down by the fence and then elks and deer jumped over the barrier and galloped up to the fence where they all settled down peacefully waiting for the hunter. He then appeared, the pigeons came flying and the birds and animals obediently followed him into the spotlight.

The light flashed on and by the fence there was only the hunter who had just woken up. By his side lay a broken gun and an old borzoi flinching in the bright light.

Work was seething again. A finale was needed to "The Hunter's Dream". The poetess' keen eyes looked round the ring. Durov was in the middle with a clown. A juggler was rehearsing by the barrier. A little further away Auntie Lida was practising a new act with her children. Yes, they were having a hard time. Natalia Konchalovskaya caught the atmospheric key of the act and a new, highly touching scene was created. The hunter woke up and his dream came true: when he fired some huge pink-and-white pelicans flew towards him and carried the gun out of the ring. Then the clown got very excited and his two-barrel shotgun whose barrels were pointing in different directions was ready to shoot it out with the trainer. A shot was fired and instead of a bird a soldier's boot flew down from the circus top.

"Well, friend, did you strike lucky?" my father asked.

"What on earth have we here! A boot!" exclaimed the dismayed clown.

"But do you know what a soldier's boot is like?" Father carefully took the boot away from the clown and they sat down together on a tub: the ginger-haired clown with his comic bright make-up and the sad-eyed humourist.

The spotlights on the two figures in the dark ring cast shadows on the barrier and the story of the war rang out:

The dust wasn't wiped from the sofa,
Nor swept from the floor below,
Shoes stood a year under the sofa,
Covered in cobwebs and dust.

Unaware of the chaos around them,
They looked at the dusty floor,
Then one day the room at once changed—
Someone walked in through the door.

And someone washed under the tap,
Took off his boots, lay down,
And a pair of hobnailed boots
Appeared on the ground.

They were covered with dirt and clay
And moss was stuck to their soles
And their tops were smeared from the road
With a thick layer of dust.

They followed a tank with the infantry,
Stood watch-guard,
Tramped across marshes,
Hid in dense forests.

They crossed rivers and mountains
And every road held danger,
And now they'd come home
For two days of rest.

The shoes made room for them.
Huddled in a corner by the wall,
They asked: "Where are you from?"
And their guests rapped: "From the war!"

The shoes stood and waited for dawn;
They stood and pondered:
"What a lot they know,
How dully we spend our days!

"But we stand and know for sure:
The war will end, the hour will come
When our owner will come home,
Clean us and put us on.

And we'll walk down the streets,
Shining on his feet,
And we'll know it wasn't in vain,
He once walked in army boots."

The lights were turned on full again and the spellbound spectators, lost in thought, gradually focused their attention on the circus again. Yes, that's how it would be! It wasn't for nothing that in these trying times the artists tried to make their performance like a celebration which everyone in the country would soon be enjoying.

I listened to the poetry every evening, wrapped in the fold of the curtain in front of the artists' exit. I also became lost in thought. I had seen the war first-hand on the way to Smolensk station and the "laughing" hyena who had dealt me a cruel blow by killing Baby, my friend and my first trained animal. As I listened, I sought my revenge on him and swore to reform every beast of prey which only knew how to kill and devour.

I now had a goal: to train Kai the cheetah to become a kind animal. In the cheetah's documents which father had, the following was written: "cheetah — beast of prey. Name — Kai. Age — 4 years". I didn't mind what was written at that time but after I'd finished my work I'd ask father to cross out the words "beast of prey" from the document.

Chapter IX

Forty minutes ago father was mauled by Pasha the sea lion. I cried in fright by the curtain where father's white stocking, which now looked a gory mess, was lying. Bandages and iodine were fetched. Father appeared for a moment from behind the curtain. He was flushed and didn't feel the pain from excitement. How much self-control my mother had! She bandaged father's leg in silence. Her hands seemed to be firm and only her dark, bluish eye-lids were trembling from the strain.

"Not a single tear in front of Daddy! He's performing in the ring. Stop it this minute!" mother ordered me.

Bandages, blood, mother's voice: "Draw out the pause. 'The Hunter's Dream' will be performed without the horse."

The short orders were carried out at once. They were backed by logic. My father was weak after losing blood, he'd find it hard to mount a horse and couldn't jump off it with a wounded leg. The item, however, wasn't taken off the bill. It was performed in turn like the others and only the performance's finale was different. Father's sensitive four-legged friend, Lilly the elephant lifted father up with her trunk and carried him out of the ring.

Father lay on the stretchers in his make-up and costume with its white ruff and gold cape. The ambulance arrived. As she rushed off, my mother threw me the key to the dressing-room. I sat there alone, sobbing and huddled in a ball, on the trunk. Someone's warm hands hugged my shoulders. I looked up and saw Auntie Lida, Nonna and Slavik. The performers didn't go off home but waited for news from the hospital. Mother came back shortly after 1 a.m.

"What's happened? How is he?" she was surrounded on all sides.

"He's alright at the moment. He's had an operation. We'll only know for sure in the morning."

Mother and I spent the night at the circus. It was a difficult night and the first time I had seen my mother cry: her eyes were dry and her tears were inconsolable. She pressed her lips and breathed deeply trying to contain her sobs. I pretended I was asleep and mother carefully tiptoed out of the dressing-room.

I quietly crept after her. She walked alone to the stables, tidied the hay which had slipped out of the cages, looked into a stall, turned out the bright light in the elephants' stall and left them a night-lamp, stopping by the sea lions, looked at them for a long time without wiping away her tears and then carefully covered the cage with tarpaulin. I couldn't keep silent any longer and threw myself at the tarpaulin, and tried to tear it off the cage.

"Let them catch cold, let them! He's the one that mauled Daddy. I hate him!"

Mother silently put the tarpaulin cover back.

"Do you want Daddy to lose his sea lions and be unhappy?"

"No! No!!!"

"Then you must try to understand. Pashka's only an animal and he hasn't got a sense of duty."

Father knew that we had to do five performances a day. We had to because the war was on and because everyone now had to do everything, even the impossible, to help win it. But you see, you couldn't explain this to Pashka. He was tired and got angry. He wanted to relax in his cage; he already felt spring was in the air but father made him work the fifth time just as hard as at the first performance.

"But how could he, Mummy?"

"Maul Daddy? He got angry, grabbed Daddy's leg, bit it and then unclenched his teeth but Daddy made him do the trick again and in a fit of rage Pashka gnashed his jaws a few times and then bit Daddy's leg."

"It's so awful, Mummy!"

"Yes, it really is but it'll be alright just as long as he hasn't got gangrene. Daddy's lost a lot of blood."

"Why didn't you send him off to hospital at once? Why did he perform right to the end?"

"What are you telling me off for, Natasha? Just imagine, the spectator has come to our circus for a rest and to forget everything. Then there's an accident and instead of completely relaxing, the spectator leaves feeling sad and frightened. You see, father didn't let the audience feel what had happened. Father was doing his duty and in the circus that now means one thing: entertaining the spectators as much as possible.

Father was doing his duty. And mother was by his side at the crucial moment and now she was spending the whole night with the animals at the circus, getting back her strength and peace of mind by looking after them. The sea lion's bite was poisonous. Even if you're skinning a fresh fish and just prick your finger, you may very well get an infection but father's whole leg was covered with teeth-marks. The doctors feared gangrene.

For five days I worked with father's assistant, Isaak Babutin. Father was in hospital. Mother hardly managed to see to the animals' feeding, the rehearsals and the performances. Every day she visited my father who was getting better.

I met Natalia Konchalovskaya more often. I loved her and very

much wanted her to feel happy. Father was feeling better and I was enthusiastic about training the cheetah. Kai had become completely tame. He let children play with him and affectionately licked Natalia's gentle hands and let me do anything I wanted with him. As I was playing with Kai, I thought up a trick: a game of leap-frog. I jumped over Kai and then stood upright. Then he jumped over me, rolled on a huge silver ball, jumped down into a small carriage and rode round the ring like a dashing rider, drawn by Emu the ostrich. Natalia suggested I should be dressed in Hungarian national costume — a velvet riding jacket, black boots and a crimson cape. However, I didn't hold a whip or a riding-crop. I took off my gloves and when I gently flicked them, Kai did his tricks one by one. How pleased my father would be when he saw my new work. Even Natalia applauded me at the rehearsals.

But spring was on its way and its swift winds raced after us as our train sped towards Moscow where we would spend the month of May. Mother and I again stood by the steps of the circus in Tsvetnoi Boulevard. The market nearby was seething with life and everyone was gay and cheerful. It seemed to me that everyone was dancing or was it everyone's birthday? Yes, it was the morning of May 9, 1945 and the birthday of peace.

There was going to be a première at the circus at twelve o'clock.

Father performed in a Russian national costume and that's why the Durovs' traditional clown's costume with its ruff, which was yellowed with time and looked like the wilted leaves of a chrysanthemum, was hanging in the dressing-room. Mother hung it up for Granny so that when she went into the dressing-room she could sit by the make-up table and remember her life at the circus.

The sound of jokes and laughter rang out behind the dressing-room door. Alexander Bushe's powerful, loud bass boomed over the loudspeaker: "Yuri Durov, everything's ready! The interval's over. Come down."

Father took Granny and they walked along arm-in-arm.

"Zina, will you and Granny sit in the audience just once in all these years! Treat yourself to this première." Father looked so gratefully into mother's eyes in which such happy little lights were dancing that day that I clung to her hand and gave her a big kiss.

"No, lovie. Zina and I are going to stand together by the curtain.

Let me really enjoy the première." Granny laughed and cried, patted my father's shoulder, sighed and added: "It's wonderful that Natasha at least is dressed like a Durov. I'll hug her when she comes out of the ring and all my memories will come alive—every one of them!"

"Yuri Durov, your turn." My father's cue was given and he flew out from behind the curtain on a troika drawn by three shiny black horses, kicking up a whirlwind of sawdust. The three horses stopped in full flight. Father jumped onto the driver's seat, his caftan blazing like a rainbow and the words of his monologue rang out:

My granddad was so full of jokes and fun,
He never once failed to win loud laughter.
And to Russia he was an honest son,
Whom she dearly loved ever after.

My granddad's life was hard-going but splendid.
I, too, mastered the circus art.
In granddad's breast a Russian heart pounded—
And the same is true of his grandson's heart!

Oh my country, my heart's loyal to you,
Oh my people, you're my inspiration.
In your struggle and labours I'm with you
And you're with me at each presentation!

The troika flew past us into the wings.

Granny swept the sawdust off my father's caftan, smoothed his tousled hair and my mother handed him his whip and the show with its amazing variety of animals flushed into action. I looked at the people who had come to the première through a chink in the curtain. Everyone was smiling.

The chink in the curtain disappeared and the curtain flew open: my mother took charge of the elephants when they left the ring, Granny helped father to change out of his caftan. The cages with the sea lions were rolled away and an announcement was made above me: "Natalia Durova! Your turn!"

Bushe's voice echoed in my heart, which stopped still and then as I was walking with Kai towards the ring, it started beating loudly: "Your turn! Your turn!"

I was so nervous that I couldn't see the audience. Then I was by Granny's side and I buried my face in her perfume-scented satin

gown. Had I been out there performing in the ring? Yes, I had! I only realised this when I saw Kai being led back to the stables.

The première was over. Its producer, Boris Shakhet told us it had been a great success.

We were congratulated! The great day had only just begun and when it was at its peak my life suddenly changed. Father handed my costume over to the wardrobe mistress with the old unused ones in front of everyone.

"Why, isn't she going to perform any more?" Granny asked in surprise and my mother sighed.

"No, she's got to study now. The circus requires culture. When she finishes school she'll choose a profession for herself."

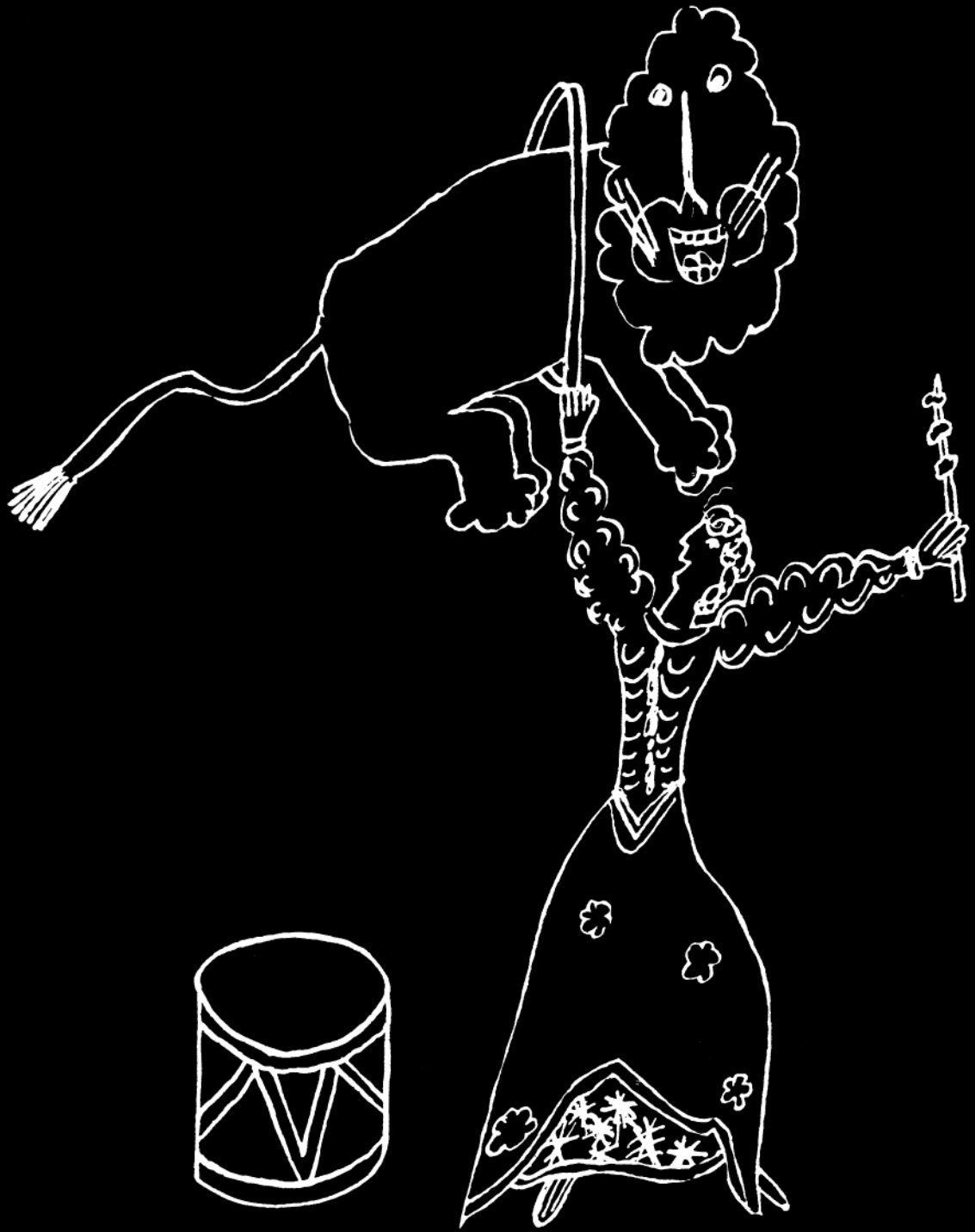
"But the cheetah act is good and well staged. Let her go into the ring," Shakhet tried to convince my father but he wouldn't give way.

Granny calmed me by saying that if my father were to go away, there's still be some animals left in her Pets Corner. I could often go and visit her. But I stubbornly turned away and then rushed out of the dressing-room to Lilly in the elephants' stables. I felt her warm trunk hugging me and realised that none of the animals in the Pets Corner could take the place of Baby, Lilly or Kai because they didn't mean so much to me. My work and life were here in the circus!

"Lilly! Darling Lilly!" I felt like crying but I didn't. I kept promising myself over and over again: "I'll always, always stay with the circus. I'll do all I can to hear those wonderful words soon:

Natalia Durova!
Your turn!

Dear reader, I've told you about what really happened when I was a little girl. Nowadays there are also children in the circus who are hereditary performers. And now I want to tell you about a little boy who performs in a circus today. Read the story about Kolya and his opening night. In the story after that you'll read about another boy whom I could not know because he lived a very long time ago but I heard about him and his good friend Jumbo the elephant from all the old artists who worked in the Russian circus before the Revolution.



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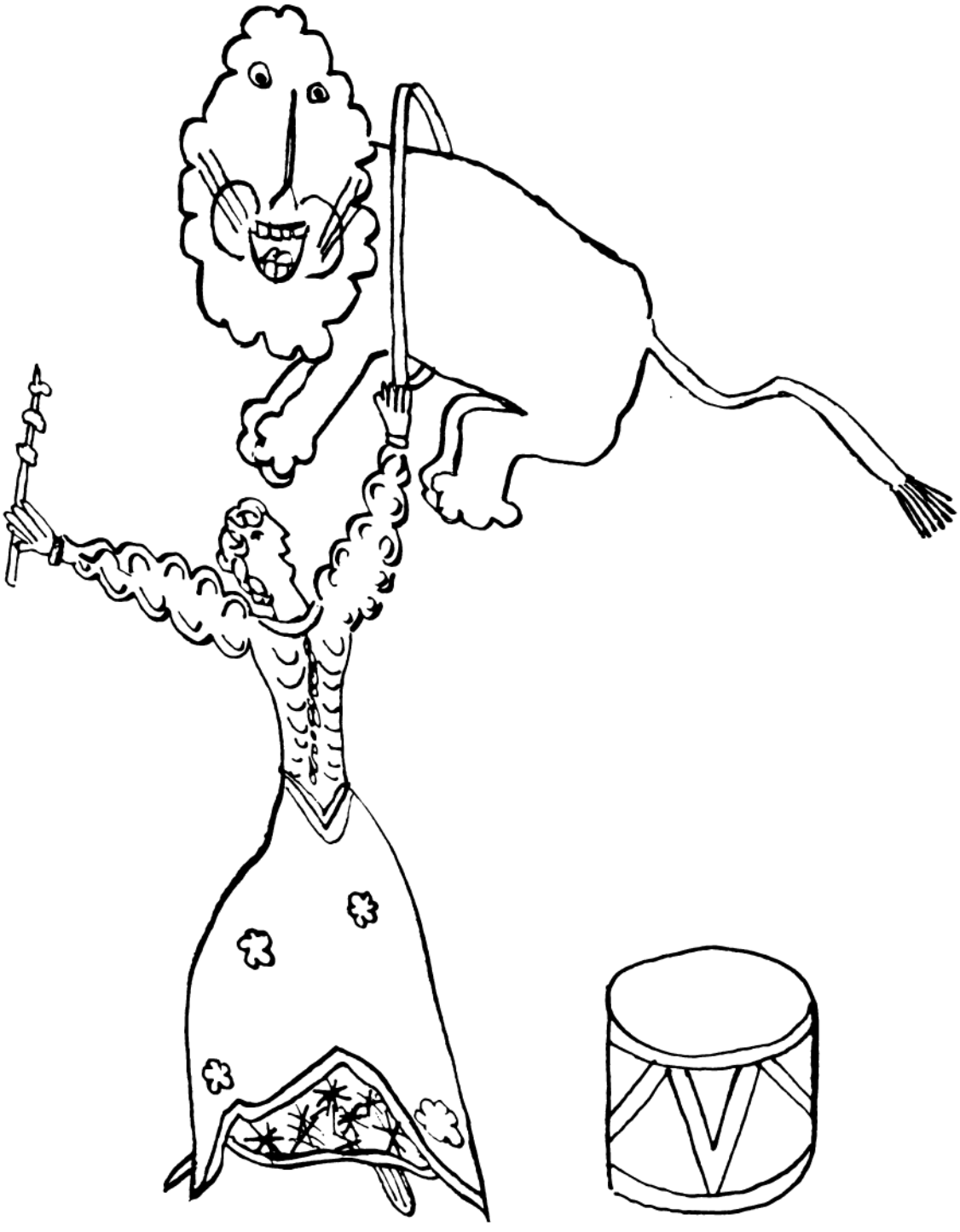


Kolka and his Opening Night

A Victim of Art

Kolka was standing despondently by the carriage window. The train hurtled along and the names of towns and stations flashed past. Then a few suntanned little boys and girls came in sight. They waved their arms. Seeing them, Kolka's thoughts passed and he at once leant out of the window and shouted: "Hello! Hel-lo!" Then Kolka loafed about in the narrow carriage passageway and rubbed his grimy eyes. Now and then, in the breaks between the regular fierce domino games, the grown-ups took some notice of him: "Let the young man turn up the radio!"

Kolka raced over to the radio. There was a crackling sound and then the announcer's voice said: "Everything's growing and getting bigger..."

A plump lady plunged out of the next compartment: "This is disgraceful, simply disgraceful! How dare you turn up the radio again!" she said.

Kolka looked spitefully at the plump lady. Catching his reflection in the glass door, he became gloomy. It really was disgraceful! But then why was everything growing and getting bigger? You see, when he was small, no one told him off for growing and getting bigger. But now...

And the moment Kolka started thinking about this his throat at once became dry and he began to feel niggling hunger pains.

"Mummy, when we arrive tomorrow are you going to cook us lunch?"

His mother looked hesitantly at his father but the latter angrily glanced at Kolka and said to his mother: "He's only due to have a sandwich in two hours' time. Don't you dare feed him." And turning to Kolka, he added: "And will you please not bother Mummy!"

"Daddy, I'm not asking for anything," Kolka answered, his head bowed.

"Whenever we're travelling, all he can do is stuff himself. Well, what can we do about it?" father explained embarrassedly to his neighbour.

The latter looked at the strange family in amazement and when father went out, he couldn't resist saying to Kolka's mother: "My dear lady, is your husband really so mean to begrudge his child an extra bit to eat? Can you imagine, such people really exist... Oh, it's not fair, it really isn't! Would you like some tinned crabs, young man?"

Kolka would have liked some crabs but his mother became embarrassed and Kolka felt offended for his father.

"Father isn't mean at all. He just feels sorry for my mother."

"Sorry—I should think so, too! Why, your mother's heart is probably breaking, I dare say!"

"No, no, please! I really do ask you not to treat my son to anything. He really mustn't. You see, we're artists."

"Artists are kind-natured people but, excuse me, your husband..."

"We're circus artists. If he puts on any more weight, I'll find it hard to lift him, let alone toss him up. My husband is a kind man but we have different opinions on the way our son is growing up."

"Mummy's happy about it, Daddy's angry and our whole act is being ruined," Kolka explained for his mother.

Their neighbour's face brightened up.

"So, you're a real victim of art, aren't you!"

"Yes, I am!" Kolka at once remembered the sandwich. That horrible word "art" had taken his food away again.

Kolka was eleven and he had heard this word used for six years.

At the drop of a pin, his father would say threateningly: "I'll take you off your work. The likes of you aren't needed by art."

'I'll take you off your work!' As if he had taken Kolka on to work! If six years ago Kolka hadn't himself asked to act the part of the New

Year under the decorated New Year's tree, he probably wouldn't be an artist now.

Kolka still remembered clearly what had happened. He had been a very good New Year! He had been dressed in a little white costume decorated with "1951" in shining red figures.

At the first performance the clown had lifted a silver balloon high in the air and shouted to the audience: "Children! Here's a jolly interesting game! Name all the words which begin with the letter "c" and stand for household things. Whoever says the last one will get this prize!"

Shouts rang out from all over the circus: "Cups, carpet, cupboard..."

After a few minutes it seemed that the supply of words had been exhausted and the clown had already begun to count: "One! Well, anyone else? Two!"

And then Kolka came forward and glancing triumphantly round the audience, shouted out loudly: "Cockroaches!"

Kolka, of course, got the silver ball but after the performance the producer scolded him and asked him to perform in future as he had been instructed.

And then Kolka acted the role so well during the rest of the holiday season that his father decided to include him in his act. Kolka stood on his father's palm, then was supported by his mother, and then jumped onto the ring and did a wild cartwheel. Then his father put a black felt cap on his head, Kolka got onto his father's head and stood firmly while his father did all sorts of impossible tricks. It wasn't easy for Kolka to stand still as he might fall at any moment. But he quickly got the hang of it and soon learnt to do somersaults and their act now was always warmly applauded.

At that time he associated "art" with the starched bow on his costume and all the audience's smiles. A year later this act was replaced by another. Art became endless rehearsals for Kolka. There was nothing dreadful about them and they were more like morning gymnastics. But instead of the audience's smiles he saw his father's stern and, at times, angry face.

Now Kolka realised that art was both of these things and if he didn't rehearse, the audience's rewarding smiles would turn into angry frowns.

Kolka's thoughts were interrupted by his neighbour: "Well, victim of art, just you look out the window..."

Kolka even felt frightened.

"Are those really waves on the sea?" he exclaimed, looking at the pillars of water, dashing at the train like a gusty wind.

"No, lad! This is a typhoon! And when we get near Vladivostok, the typhoon will drench us all and we'll be soaked to the skin. It's the heaviest rain in the world!"

Kolka jumped out of the train first and as he ran to the station building his suit became wet through as if he'd been standing under a fire hose.

The rain now fell heavily and evenly and then suddenly began to whirl, gathering huge fountains of water and tossing spray at the station windows.

Kolka and his father and mother went inside the station.

"Is nobody here from the circus?" his father asked the station-master.

The latter shook his head.

"How disgraceful! Fancy them not even thinking of meeting us in a downpour like this. The child may catch cold: he's soaked through and his jacket's wringing wet!" his mother said anxiously.

"Let's wait—perhaps someone will come after all."

They waited for a couple of hours and finally his father got up and said: "I'll go and find out. The circus isn't far away."

Another hour passed. Kolka became bored. He took a pencil and an old poster. Neither his mother nor he were on the poster because they had not been artists at the time. Father then worked with his acrobat father of whom Kolka was afraid. Mother often cried then. She was new to the circus and that's why grandfather nagged her and grumbled: "Everyone's got his place in life. Since she's a clerk let her rattle away at her accounts but I won't let her spoil my act. I don't need artists like her."

Father had to break away from Grandfather. They put together a small act called "3 Acrobats" and went their own ways. Kolka thought for a while and then began to draw a moustache on his grandfather's face on the poster. Soon his grandfather began to look like an old sea dog but his father still didn't return. It was raining just as hard outside.

"Let's go. We'll have to leave our things in the left-luggage room and go to the circus," his mother said wearily.

The Performance Is Cancelled

People ran stooping, as if laden down by something. The rain lashed their backs and drove them on. Everything around flashed like on the worn reel of an old film and it was impossible to make anything out.

"Quick! Let's run! We must help!" a sailor shouted nearby.

Kolka and his mother were about to rush after the sailor but Kolka's mother suddenly stopped and asked: "Where's the circus? Is it still a long way?"

"Run after me," the sailor replied, waving his arm. "They're in danger! Help!"

Kolka and his mother raced after the sailor. The rain lashed at the coats which they had thrown over their heads. Suddenly they all stopped and, running into one another, crowded by a small public garden. Someone pushed the sailor aside: "Can't you see? The firemen have arrived and are saving them without your help."

"Firemen? This isn't a fire! We sailors are more used to dealing with water. The circus is standing in a pit. Everything is going to be flooded. It's not the first time it's happened, you know," the sailor shouted excitedly.

The water rolled down the slope to the public garden in a frenzied cascade. Because of the crowd Kolka couldn't make out what was happening below but by the noise and excitement around him he realized that someone was in danger. Suddenly Kolka felt his mother's hand painfully gripping his shoulder: "Let me through!

Let me through! The circus! The circus! My husband's in there..."

The sailor rushed over to her and, pushing through the crowd, helped her to get to the steps.

The rain beat down more and more fiercely on everything that got in its way.

Firemen, performers and sailors were rushing about by the circus, dragging cages and leading the animals out.

The circus dome had been weighed down by the heavy water, which had gathered around the poles supporting the dome and threatened at any moment to break the pillars and bring down the circus. Kolka caught sight of his father on the top of the dome jumping onto the flooded tarpaulin and cutting through it. The water began to pour through at a powerful but even pace.

"Daddy! We're here!" Kolka shouted loudly but then a strong wind caught him and drove him right into the circus. His mother was left somewhere far behind. Kolka became totally confused.

The ring was like a marsh. The sawdust had swollen and was floating like rafts made of frog-spawn. The doors of the main entrance and wings, which were opposite each other, kept creaking open and shut. The frightened elephants kept roaring. Two little Australian kangaroos dashed about their open air cage. When the water fell on their noses, the kangaroos snorted, shook themselves and angrily rushed at each other, boxing in the rain.

Kolka started to help the firemen who were clumsily transferring the animals from pens into cages. Then he caught sight of Maria Kustova, an old dog trainer, running through the stables, pleading to everyone: "Please, please! Help me! My dogs ... my dogs are in there."

But the firemen didn't feel as sorry for the dogs as for the monkeys and ostriches and the old trainer went on pleading: "My dogs are in there! Please help..."

"I'll help you," Kolka volunteered.

At this moment a man came up to them.

"Well, where are these dogs then? Come on, show me, lad."

"Over there," Kolka replied and gasped: their train acquaintance was standing before them. "What, you're here, too?"

"That's right. Now I'm also a victim of art. Well, come on, show me the way."

"Quick," said Maria Kustova, "get them out of here. Who on earth built the circus in a pit?"

With the yapping dogs they made their way into the yard where some vehicles were parked and cages were being put into the backs of lorries and covered with tarpaulin.

Maria Kustova looked up. The wind blew back her hood and the rain stuck her sparse hair to her cheeks. Kolka suddenly began to feel sorry for her.

"You're..." He wanted to tell her that she was good and kind and that he would always help her but he simply took off his jacket and handed it to her.

She didn't understand what he was doing and took the rain-sodden jacket, wrung it and for some reason put it back on Kolka.

A few hours later the sky became noticeably brighter and the rain stopped beating down on the ground. It now poured down as if it wanted to rinse everything.

And when the sun appeared, the rain became completely transparent. Squinting, the sun gently peeped through a storm cloud and dried the circus, people and animals.

The next morning when a vehicle brought their things from the station, Kolka no longer thought about the typhoon — the heaviest rain in the world. He was hovering about the stables. Then, when some people appeared by the box-office in the garden, he went out to the main entrance where a brightly-coloured poster was hanging. Kolka's eyes quickly ran over it:

NIKITIN — trained horses,
KHROMOV — juggler,
The 3 BIRIUKOVS — ground acrobats.

Then his gaze lingered. He liked seeing his surname on the poster. He was going to perform for the first time here in Vladivostok.

Locking up their dressing-room, his father went to the manager to find out where they were going to live and Kolka stayed behind in the public garden.

He had never before seen so many different-looking people near the circus in any other town. Sailors were walking jauntily along in bell-bottomed trousers; peasants with baskets who had come

to the market, were dozing or eating something on the benches. Now and then shoppers came over from the department store situated in an enormous grey building opposite and examined their buys at leisure.

Kolka walked slowly and grandly by the bill-board. He wanted to run up to the group of sailors standing nearby but he didn't because a large crowd of school-children were also hovering by the main entrance. To his dismay, the children took no notice of him and there was no way of letting them know that the artist Nikolai Biriukov was standing before them...

Suddenly Lyonka Gradov flew out of the circus yard on a scooter.

"Hello, Biriukov!"

"Hello! Have you been working here long?"

"A week. This is my fourth day at school. When are you starting?"

Kolka glanced at the children, pointed towards the poster and tapping on the red figure "3" which came before his surname, said loudly: "You see, it says tomorrow but without rehearsals... I don't know..."

"How many times do you need to be told not to hover about the bill-board?!" His father looked furious.

If Kolka had noticed his father before, he, of course, would have gone away from the posters at once but he appeared out of the blue.

"Hello, Uncle Lyosha," Lyonka Gradov smiled, seeing Kolka's father.

"It's a very good thing we've met you!" Kolka's father said sullenly.

Lyonka stood still in fright with one foot on his scooter.

"Daddy, I only showed him when we're going to start work. I..."

"Alright, alright! We'll sort things out later but now let's go and get you enrolled at school. You'll start tomorrow. Which school are you going to?" Kolka's father turned to confused-looking Lyonka.

But Kolka stealthily glanced at the children by the entrance, who were looking curiously and sympathetically at him.

His mother came out of the circus.

"Well, which school is it?" his father repeated.

"It is over there on the hill. School No. 1."

"Well, come on, let's be off!"

And they all, except for mother who was left with the cases, went to enroll Kolka in the school...

School Can Wait

It was a chilly morning. Kolka put on his grey jacket, took his satchel and stuffing into it his breakfast which his mother had carefully packed for him in a paper serviette, ran out into the street. Clanking, the trams crawled along the steep streets which cut up the hill. Their discordant clanking sounded like knives being sharpened in the stables when the animals' food was being prepared in the mornings. Kolka was about to ride in the tram but then he changed his mind, jumped off and decided to go on foot: another twenty seven minutes were left before the lesson.

Kolka crossed the street and began walking past the gardens to the bridge beneath which there was a railway line. If he waited, he might see a steam engine or even a whole train.

On his way to the bridge Kolka stopped by the window of a clock repair shop in which a great many clocks were all set differently. Watch-makers with tweezers like those with which the circus artists plucked their eye-brows, were "plucking" the mechanisms out of the clocks. Kolka watched them working and then walked on.

Caravans on wheels lined the circus yard. Nearby was the circus hostel, reminiscent of a long narrow flattened box.

Kolka stopped by one of the caravans. Maria Kustova looked out from behind a lace curtain.

"Hello," Kolka greeted her.

"Good morning, darling!" she replied.

Kolka knew that she called everyone darling, even his father and he didn't mind at all.

"We've been put up in a hotel. Mother doesn't like in there because she's not allowed to cook. When the chamber maid comes, we hide our electric ring in the table drawer. If only we could get a caravan like yours!" said Kolka, looking enviously inside.

"When someone leaves, you'll move over here. Would you like a cup of coffee?" She disappeared behind the curtain where the coffee, which had boiled over, was sizzling on the stove.

Kolka clambered into the caravan and leaving his satchel by the door, sat down at the table.

"Are you off to school?"

"No, my lessons are in the afternoon," Kolka lied and reached for a delicious-looking pancake. He decided he'd go to the second lesson. "Have you already let out your dogs?"

"We'll have breakfast first and then I'll tell them to let the dogs out. It's so muddy after the rain, they'll get absolutely filthy and will have to be bathed before work. It's so hard here with them! They find holes in the fence and run straight to the port."

"May I look after them? What wonderful pancakes!"

She smiled with satisfaction and Kolka received two more delicious pancakes. After breakfast he ran to the other end of the yard where a pot containing the dogs' soup was smoking. Shortly afterwards a pack of highly strung little dogs ran out of the circus, whining and barking.

One of the most frisky dogs jumped through a hole in the dilapidated fence and Kolka went after him and headed for the port. What wonderful trawlers, little bright-coloured motor boats and splendid lauches he saw! But what amazed him most was the water. It was murky just like oil. You couldn't swim in it but if you threw a stone in it or stamed rainbow-like rings at once rippled across the surface and flashed like the shiny beads on Kolka's costume and then became murky dark water again.

Kolka untied his shoe laces and began lashing at the water with his arms and legs, raising jets of spray. With his shoes slung over his shoulder Kolka stood sopping-wet by the moorage for a long time,

looking out to sea. He liked water very much and found it interesting to look at even in the circus. If you threw some manganese into some ordinary water, you got fake cranberry water for the clowns. And if you dipped a little bag of blueing into the water and then soaked the shirtfront of Daddy's best dress-coat and Kolka's school collars in it, they came out bluish and ever so clean. But here the water varied greatly: it was dark by the shore, bluey-green slightly further out and steel-coloured in the far distance where sea merged with the smoky clouds. In the bay the islets stood out like rust-coloured warts against the sea's mirror-like surface, the autumnal trees on them blazed crimson and the water was a firey yellow. Because Kolka looked at them for a long time, the islands suddenly seemed to float along, molten with gold by the noonday sun.

The bells rang on the ships and Kolka, remembering he had to go to school, rushed headlong across the port into the town. It was only when he reached the school that he suddenly noticed he had forgotten his satchel. It was too late to go back for it. Kolka sat down on the steps, put his boots onto his dirty feet and went to look for the fourth form.

Kolka's Sufferings

The lessons were nearly over. Kolka opened the door. The teacher was standing by the blackboard. She was young, snubnosed and wore glasses.

"What do you want, boy?" she said, looking at Kolka who was tousled and splattered with spray.

"I'm new! My name's Nikolai Biriukov."

"Do you really not know that it's forbidden to enter

the classroom during lessons? And why are you so late?"

"We, we..." Kolka lowered his head, thinking of what to say and catching sight of his oil-smeared legs, he pertly replied: "We were unpacking."

The teacher remained silent and while the children whispered loudly, she showed Kolka to the back row.

Kolka sat down and started to examine the backs of the heads of the children in front. He immediately recognised a boy with straight ash-grey eyebrows who turned in his direction. He had seen him and the two girls sitting at the same desk at the circus the day before.

The bell rang and the children dashed out of the classroom but the teacher spent a long time questioning Kolka about the schools he had attended before. Kolka vacantly studied her round, freckled face and sadly thought about how the children had probably already gone home.

"Tomorrow make sure you arrive on time for your lessons and dress tidier. Have you got your text-books?"

"Yes," Kolka replied and immediately decided that the teacher was nasty.

He returned to the circus in a gloomy mood and when before the rehearsal his father asked him: "Well, how was it?" he shook his head vaguely.

"Where did you get so dirty?" his mother threw up her hands.

"During the gym lesson," Kolka kept his head again and remembering that he hadn't found out his lessons for the next day, immediately decided to have done with the hard school day once and for all.

"We weren't given any prep," he told his mother and went off to rehearse.

At the rehearsal in the ring Kolka was inattentive and his father kept saying: "Smoother. Smoother. Watch your hands."

"What do you expect? The child's tired after school," Kolka's mother replied and Kolka silently listened and thought about his life.

No, he clearly wasn't lucky as far as schools went. Judge for yourselves! Was Kolka to blame that he had to change schools six or seven times during the school year? At one school they hadn't

completed the syllabus whereas at another which Kolka attended after moving towns on a tour, it turned out they had completed it long ago. That's when Kolka started getting lots of low marks and, more important, lots of tellings-off.

"If you don't come to your senses, I'll take you away from your work," his father said firmly and all Kolka could do was to despondently go off to his new school friends for help.

This was Kolka's third year of misery. The teachers treated him distrustfully. They reckoned that in the twenty or so days which Kolka spent at each school he couldn't possibly learn very much and so feeling sorry for him, they didn't give him very low marks. And he himself didn't ever reckon on getting high ones.

Everywhere he was greatly liked by the rest of his class. It's not hard to see why: in the morning he would sit with them in class and in the evening he would take them to the circus where in the brightly-lit ring he performed as a real artist and received stormy applause and calls of "encore" and was perhaps even presented with flowers.

He was top of the class at gymnastics and as he was generally a capable boy, he was sometimes lucky at a school and his report contained a few excellent marks and his father always remarked: "If you lived in one place, you wouldn't keep changing schools and, who knows, might become a real scholar."

But Kolka didn't at all want to live in one place. When children said to him: "In my home, you know..." Kolka listened to them with interest but had his own idea of the word "home": for him it meant a small iron trunk which contained an orange lampshade, some cushions embroidered by his mother on journeys and, more importantly, their costumes, posters and photographs. And when all these things were taken out of the trunk, laid out and hung up anywhere at all, for Kolka this was home. He thought that this was a much more interesting way to live than to stay in one place.

They had been here in Vladivostok before when Kolka was still classified as being of "pre-school age" and the children older than him teased him by calling him "Mummy's lit-

tle boy" and he wasn't given a separate ticket on the train. However, Kolka even then was already a performer.

"What's this school going to be like?" Kolka wondered sadly, thinking about his conversation with the teacher again.

Watch Out!

Kolka began to put on weight. He did so at such a fast rate that his father, looking at his tight fitting costume said to his mother: "You were wrong not to listen to me. How is it you don't understand? It's harder for you, you know!"

But his mother suffered in silence. In the pyramid when she stood on her husband's head and Kolka smoothly did a handstand and supported all of his forty kilos on her head, she only flinched slightly and, as before, kept smiling for the audience. She fed Kolka with broths and fruits at home when his father wasn't about and was happy when her son's face became rounder. This made Kolka's father very angry and Kolka said of him: "It's because my Daddy is from a real circus family. His grandfather was a tight-rope-walker and so was his grandfather's father and my Daddy was an even better rope-walker but became an acrobat instead. He can do everything," Kolka ended up by saying and for a long time pondered upon the fact that if his father hadn't met his mother in Leningrad and hadn't married her—a girl who had no connections with the circus—then Kolka would have become a rope-walker. But what in fact had happened? His mother hadn't worked at first and his grandfather got angry but Kolka's father always told him: "I've asked you all to leave my wife alone. She's going to work when she wants to."

"But not in my act, remember that. I've got enough of my own people," his grandfather ranted on and looked at his family: his daughter who was also a rope-walker and his wife, Kolka's grandmother who was only an assistant.

Things continued this way for a long time until Kolka started school. Then his parents left his bad-tempered grandfather and his mother became an acrobat and so did Kolka. And now all the family were performers. They had their own dressing-room at every circus and mother always put up a postcard of Anichkov Bridge in Leningrad above her make-up box.

Kolka hadn't ever been to Leningrad and only knew about it from this postcard, but he always said to his chums: "We're from Leningrad." And, pointing at the postcard, asked: "It's beautiful, isn't it? And it's like that everywhere."

Kolka very much wanted to go to Leningrad but to do so he would have to work hard and this was just what he wasn't good at. Before the end of the rehearsal he often said to his father: "Daddy, I haven't done my prep yet." And at the same time he looked so sadly into his father's eyes that the latter realised if he didn't let him go, he couldn't tell him off later for his low marks. When Kolka was let off, he, of course, never thought of doing his prep because, you see, there were other things in life like football and stamps and as for school, well, at any school Kolka felt just as if he were in a circus ring. True, his father often said to him: "You're a performer in the ring but you must be a pupil at school. Understand?"

And Kolka nodded and went on just as before. For three days at school he had already been a hero; during the breaks his schoolmates gathered round his desk and he told them story after story about the circus.

"I'm having a very hard time now: I've got to study at school and work hard in the act. I used to stand on top but now I'm going to be in the middle and that's even harder," Kolka sighed, watching the children who were listening to him with bated breath.

"But what does 'on top' mean?" asked a plump girl with two pigtails bobbing on either side of her head.

She instantly inspired confidence in Kolka. Her name was Liusya Shustikova and she was the leader of the school team Kolka happened to be in.

"You see, there're three people in our act: father, mother and me. I'm on top which means I have to do a somersault and support myself in all sorts of positions: in mother's arms and on her head and when she jumps down I have to land neatly on father's shoulders with changing positions."

"And what about the middle one?"

Kolka thought for a while and then grabbing by the arm a tall, gawky boy who had been staring enthusiastically at him all the time, said: "Watch! Kadkin, what's your name?"

"Vitya," replied the latter, looking questioningly and kindly at Kolka.

"Watch! Vitya, bend your knees and stand firm!" Kolka ordered. "Now, when I do a hand-stand, catch my legs, got it?"

"O. K."

"Don't, he's not strong enough!" the girls gasped.

But Kolka intrepidly grabbed Kadkin's bony knees and in a trice the children were staring at Kolka's legs dangling in the air.

"Right, good, allez..."

Vitya held onto Kolka's legs so tightly that it even hurt Kolka but so as to stand on his hands longer, he didn't show it and hardly moving his tongue, said: "Now I'm on top and he's in the middle — that's what we say in the circus. He's not only got to keep standing still but he's got to support me, too. He's got a double load."

That's how the breaks passed but the lessons went slowly for Kolka. He would watch the teacher's face, waiting to be called out...

"This is probably it," Kolka thought.

And sure enough, the teacher's eyes lingered on him and gently tapping her pencil on her journal, she said: "Biriukov, come to the blackboard."

Kolka stood up and the desk top slowly cracked. He put one leg out and stopped.

"Come on! Come on! Come here and answer the questions."

Frowning, Kolka twirled the end of his tie and didn't move.

"Haven't you learnt the lesson?"

Silence.

"Then I'll have to put a question mark by your name for the first time."

Kolka sat down. He was relieved because a question mark didn't

mean anything and, of course, wouldn't be put down in his report and so he could relax and invite his friends to the circus.

That day happened to be a Saturday and there would be a matinée performance.

Kolka was very pleased when his friends saw him in his velvet costume and huge white and sparkling gold bow and began to applaud. Almost toppling over to the row in front, Kadkin yelled with all his might: "Bravo, Kolka Biriukov!"

And Kolka tried hard. He had never bowed so proudly before. He would now show his friends what a real acrobat he was. He was already in his mother's arms, stood straight and now — a somersault and head over heels straight into his father's arms.

But suddenly his mother let out a quiet shriek. Jumping down clumsily, Kolka tumbled onto the rug. He looked in fright from his father to his mother. She was shaking her arm rather strangely and her smile became somewhat confused.

There was thunderous applause. Kolka spotted Liusya and his friends and bowed only in their direction.

The doctor from the circus surgery came to his mother behind the curtain.

"Show him your arm," said Kolka's father anxiously.

The curtain opened again but only Kolka and his father went out to bow.

Kolka only realised that his mother had broken her arm when his father, as he was getting into the ambulance with his mother said to him: "Go home and wait."

Liusya and Vitya, who were also worried, took Kolka to the hotel.

"But don't you get upset, it'll heal quickly. My Dad, you know, when he's loading in the port, sometimes does something to his arm, too... But he gets better ever so quickly," Liusya said comfortingly to Kolka.

His friends waited for Kolka's parents for a long time and tried to entertain Kolka but for some reason or other the conversation kept coming back to what had happened.

"But is it really terribly hard being an artist?" Liusya asked, looking admiringly at Kolka.

"No, its not at all. If you like, you can become an artist too."

Liusya blushed and Kolka, immediately guessing what was the matter, said:

"You can lose weight in no time at all—you need to run more. You'll definitely become an artist. While we're here in Vladivostok, I'll give you some coaching myself. Then you'll see..."

Vitya Kadkin sat in silence. He envied Liusya and was puzzled why Kolka had suddenly forgotten about him. Suddenly Vitya said: "What kind of factory isn't situated on land?"

The children looked at him and he quickly answered himself: "A crab factory."

Liusya and Kolya were bewildered but Vitya, waving his arms in the air, said angrily: "And you also don't know what's written on the boxes of tins! You probably think it says 'Chatka' but that's only half of the word 'Kamchatka'. So there. Well, I'll be off now," Kadkin finished just as suddenly and walked towards the door.

"Hang on!" Liusya tried to stop him but he didn't even turn round.

A Hard Life

They began to rehearse less and less. Kolka hardly even appeared at the circus and his father was depressed and disappeared for days at a time, examining the poles from the old act in which he and Kolka's mother had worked as a twosome when Kolka was small. The small, round poles were made of aluminium so that they were lighter to support on one's shoulders and forehead. Kolka's mother would climb up them almost to the top of the dome and then do all sorts of incredible tricks. She would fasten herself to the cold pole and hanging head downwards with her hands dangling helplessly, she looked like

a winged bird for a few seconds. Then she would soar upwards, stretch out her strong wing-like arms and, swaying smoothly in the air, look proudly and boldly at the audience. Then with her foot still in the loop, his mother would rest her other foot against the pole and it looked as if she had been standing on the floor and then had been lifted vertically into the air. In this position on the long pole which was slightly bent under her weight, she became like a ship's flag.

Kolka hoped that he would now perhaps work instead of his mother on the pole and his mother would sit in the first row, which she would be allowed to do because she would no longer be performing, and she would watch how Kolka worked, rest and get better.

Mother's arm mended slowly. Maria Kustova now looked after their family. She would come in the mornings with food, noisily potter about the stove all day and only leave in the evening.

Mother watched him doing his homework. Kolka couldn't study every day and, what's more, he often thought that there was no point in him doing so.

"I used not to work but still got average marks and now that I am studying, I still get them!" he said with irritation, throwing aside his maths exercise book.

His mother sadly smiled and stroked Kolka's floppy hair with her good hand.

"Well, on the other hand it means you've really deserved them and they aren't just a fluke. Your marks are now almost bordering on good ones and if you work even harder, you'll see for yourself what a good pupil you become. Only you probably won't be able to do that."

"Yes, I will... 'Forty litres were poured into one pipe and twenty seven litres were poured into another. In how many hours will the pool be filled if one knows that...' You see, pipes again but what on earth do I need all this for if I don't want to be a mathematician? I'm already an artist. Let's ask Maria, if she learnt the metric system."

Caught unawares, she looked questioningly at Kolka's mother and shook her head.

"There you are! And I got a fail mark for this system today."

"Why didn't you learn it then?"

"Oh, Mummy, what's the point of learning it? Maria didn't learn it and she's an excellent artist and I'm not going to and you'll see how I turn out without any maths."

"Just look whose example you've decided to follow!" Maria Kustova blushed and said angrily and quickly: "But perhaps your artist still feels ashamed that she takes ten whole minutes to sign her name and traces every single letter with difficulty with her tongue sticking out like a six-year old's. Huhh, a fine example I am for you!"

Kolka glanced mistrustfully at her.

"You don't believe me? Give me some paper and a pen..." Maria Kustova looked at the clean sheet of paper and kept muttering: "Oh you'll become a mediocre circus performer, not a real artist. Do you know what mediocre means? It's when a person's no better than thousands of others at doing something. But you've got to be a real artist."

She handed to Kolka the sheet of paper on which she had written in large, sprawling letters: 'Kustoni'.

"You've made a mistake!" objected Kolka.

"You see, I can't even write my own surname correctly... Well, where's the mistake? Correct it for me!"

"There... You wrote 'ni' instead of 'va'." Kolka was about to correct it but his mother stopped him.

"No, don't touch him, let him correct it himself!" Maria Kustova interrupted her. "You see, he doesn't know what the old circus was like when Russian surnames weren't recognised. Let him correct the mistakes and solve his problems. And then when he's learnt to work out how much water's in these pools..." She thought for a moment and then continued: "You're a silly boy, you really are. Perhaps you'll solve this problem now just because you have to and later on you'll think up an act with a pool which has never been performed in any other circus before."

And Kolka worked on his problems.

When in trouble with a problem which he couldn't work out, he ran to Liusya, looked at her exercise book with a serious expression on his face and asked condescendingly: "You're still doing them, are you?"

"What about you?"

"Me? Why, I sat down straight away and did them at once! Easy as pie, aren't they!"

However, Kolka felt ashamed of boasting and thought he'd better leave as quickly as he could. He went to Vitya Kadkin but when Vitya tried to explain the problem to him, he interrupted him sharply: "That'll do! You're only good at explaining! Give me your exercise book and I'll work it out myself!"

Vitya obediently gave him the book and Kolka quietly copied the problem at home, comforting himself: "So what, I'm leaving in a week's time and heaven knows what the next school will be like."

But that was what it was like at first. When it became clear he would no longer be appearing every evening before an audience in his velvet costume and starched bow and the Biriukovs' act was no longer on the programme he went on getting fail marks, Kolka's school-mates invited him to a team meeting.

"You're not working now, you know. Why aren't you doing your school work? Perhaps you need help? You're letting down our whole team," said Liusya Shustikova.

"Look, why are you getting at him?" Vitya asked sternly. "The fellow's having a hard time and you don't know what the circus is like, do you, but you keep on attacking him. Haven't you read the circus story about the white poodle? You have? And what about the one about the rubber boy? And when Kolka arrived here, did you see how he got it hot from his father by the circus?... Of course, he has a hard time, but you... Huhh!" He waved his hand and sat down next to Kolka.

Kolka gratefully shook his friend's hand under the desk and pulled a sad face, showing how tired he was and there was no point attacking him. They would only made things worse and Kolka's life was hard enough without that.

A few days later when both stories about the white poodle and the boy who was made of rubber were read out in class all the children without exception felt sorry for Kolka and envied Vitya who was his friend. They all wanted to do something for Kolka.

"Listen, perhaps we could ask our teacher Liudmila Nikolayevna to talk to your parents? You'd be better off then, wouldn't you?"

"No, what's the point? Don't, let things stay as they are!" Kolka sighed but at once became afraid and thought to him-

self: "What will happen if Liudmila Nikolayevna speaks to Mother!"

Sharing his misgivings with Vitya, he decided never to leave the hotel after school.

However, things turned out differently.

It's Your Own Fault

"Guess what I just heard! It was dreadful!" Vitya flung his satchel down, flopped into a chair and began breathing loudly and heavily.

Kolka touched his shoulder but Vitya, gasping with excitement after his run, just couldn't explain anything.

"In the changing-room... I left my rubber boots there. You know, the new ones my granny bought me..."

"So you're in for it, too!" Kolka said. "Take mine or will they be too small for you? How much did they cost?"

"I don't know. Probably a couple of roubles..."

"Well, then what's the problem, buy some new ones..."

"What for?"

"Oh, you are funny! Mother will give me the money. I'm paid a salary, you know."

"There's no need. I've got my boots with me. Oh, you can't imagine what happened... I went back for my boots and Liusya Shustikova and the others were shouting and yelling in the changing-room: 'We must go and have a look! Of course, he's in a bad way and we're just sitting here and not helping him!' Liudmila Nikolayevna was telling them something about the circus. I couldn't let them see me or she'd have set me some extra work, you know.

Then everyone began shouting at once and Liudmila Nikolayevna said: 'We'll go there, don't worry, we'll most certainly go there. Something's wrong. I'll ask Kolka myself tomorrow. You've probably got it all wrong.' That means she's coming to see your mother. That's for certain."

"Oh, come off it!"

"I mean it! I heard it myself."

"I'll have to sit at home all day tomorrow. We won't go to school..."

"Oh, Kolka! But what happens if my granny finds out?"

"We'll say we've been given the day off."

They didn't have time to arrange things because Kolka's mother came back from having her arm dressed.

"Home already? We'll have lunch now. Daddy's got held up at the circus."

"Mummy, we're not going to school tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"The school's being disinfected."

"Has someone fallen ill?"

"Yes, a girl, you know, has gone down with pneumonia," Vitya blurted out.

"Oh no, really!" Mother looked in surprise at the boys.

"She's got it badly and keeps coughing all the time... She's taking all sorts of medicine," Kolka chimed in.

"But schools aren't disinfected when someone's got pneumonia!"

"Mummy, she probably hasn't got pneumonia at all but something catching like ... inflamed influenza."

His mother seemed to believe him.

"Alright, alright. But so that you don't catch anything, dinner must disappear off the table in a second. There's also apple pie for you afterwards. Tuck in while your father isn't here."

But the delicious, light, crispy pie smelling of apples and vanilla had only just been put on the table when Kolka's father walked in.

"He-ha! So, our pupils are having lunch? I've been buying them bananas but they didn't wait for me."

"We've got a pie today," Kolka's mother said.

"What are we celebrating?"

"Oh, aren't you ashamed of yourself? Today is the sixth anniversary of your son's first night."

"Oh, sorry! I really did drop a clanger... Allow me to congratulate Nikolai Biriukov the artist and present him this small gift." Kolka's father unwrapped the package.

"Table tennis! Oh, Daddy!" Kolka rushed to embrace his father.

But then his father noticed Vitya was looking embarrassed and slipped his hand into his pocket.

"Incidentally, the hero's friends also have to receive a present. Guess which hand it's in, young man!" he said, turning to Vitya. "Come on!"

"That one!" said Vitya, pointing.

"You're right!" Kolka's father took a round narrow tube from behind his back, closed one eye and put it to the other one.

"A kaleidoscope!" Vitya exclaimed.

"And you, dear, can put that piece of pie back," said Kolka's father without turning towards him, "You've already had one piece. You must learn to combine theory with practice."

Kolka sighed and put the pie back on the plate. But in the evening when Vitya had gone to show the kaleidoscope to his grandmother, Kolka's father was at the circus and his mother was dozing in a chair, he crept up to the sideboard and shortly afterwards only a few crumbs of pastry faintly smelling of vanilla and an apple pip which had accidentally fallen into the pie were left on the plate. But Kolka didn't get into trouble at home. He caught it the next day during a rehearsal at the circus when the whole class and Liudmila Nikolayevna walked in.

"What do they want here?" Kolka, who at this moment was working with his father in the ring, thought angrily.

Liudmila Nikolayevna smiled at him and turning to the artists who were rehearsing, said: "We've been given permission to make a day excursion to the circus. You don't mind, do you?"

The artists began greeting the children who answered 'hello!' in unison and scattered along the first row.

The rehearsal continued.

Kolka's arms and legs went numb. He looked imploringly at his father, silently begging: "Daddy, please hit me..."

The children keenly watched the rehearsal. Several circus acts were going on in the ring at the same time. A juggler tossing maces into the air was rehearsing next to Kolka and his father. He juggled slowly and often had to bend down for a mace which had fallen onto the rug. Not far away a magician was bustling about by a table covered with lots of different objects.

Maria Kustova's rowdy dogs were begging for sugar and doing the tricks she set them. She shooed the dogs away which weren't taking part but they stayed near her wagging their tails and licking her hands.

"Never mind, children, they're just rehearsing. They'll work properly for you at the performance," said Maria, stroking her dogs.

Kolka suddenly stiffened and his arms and legs wouldn't obey him. Telltale tears welled in his eyes and he burst out crying, rubbing his tears away with his fist.

Then Liusya Shustikova jumped over the barrier, ran over to Kolka's father and shouted angrily: "You've no right to torture Kolka! Why do you beat him and force him to work? Because of you he's working badly at school!"

The rest of the children also ran into the ring and surrounded Kolka. His cheeks blushed crimson. The other artists stopped rehearsing and came over to the children.

Kolka's father waved his hands in bewilderment.

"Come now! Nothing of the sort. Who told you that? There's been some misunderstanding."

"I thought as much," said Liudmila Nikolayevna.

"Kolka told us and we read about the rubber boy ourselves."

Kolka's father only looked at him and said nothing. But Kolka sensed that he was shocked and was even afraid to look up. And everyone around him grew silent as luck would have it. Even the dogs stopped barking. Kolka felt that everyone could hear how his heart was pounding loudly. And then Maria Kustova said: "Wait a minute, children. It's Kolka who's mixed things up. He's been telling you about my childhood. But you won't be angry with him for being a real artist, will you? He started playing the part and got so carried away that he decided that it was he and not Maria Kustova who got beaten fifty years ago. I told him and then he

told you. Yes, it's no good remembering the old days. The animals are about to be fed. Let Kolka show them to you."

Kolka was infinitely grateful to the old trainer and although he felt that his school-mates despised him, he hurriedly tried to tell them everything he knew: "The elephant eats a great deal of potatoes, carrots, beetroots, cabbage and bread. In all one hundred and twenty kilos a day. Now I'm going to give him some bread."

Kolka asked the keeper for one of the eight loaves that had been got ready and handed it to the elephant which took it with his trunk, put it under his foot, broke it and began chewing.

"Why doesn't he bite it?"

"Because he's got teeth which grind everything. They're like slabs with rough surfaces. Each tooth weighs over half a kilo."

Then suddenly Vitya Kadkin appeared beside Kolka. No one knew where he'd come from. He was greeted coldly and one of the girls said: "Sticker's arrived..."

"Just you dare say that again. Don't you know you mustn't say bad things here? You know, once... Tell them about the parrot," said Vitya.

A bright blue parrot was swaying on a small perch. Vitya was right—it could talk. It was given lessons when it was dark all around because its conditioned reflex worked better, perhaps from fright, and then it spoke very clearly indeed. When the parrot is moved about, its cage is always covered so that it doesn't catch cold. And the loaders, as one might expect, often use spicy language. And the parrot learnt these words and once at a rehearsal came out with its own words instead of the trainer's.

"Say 'Sticker'!.." the children kept on at the parrot.

But the parrot calmly rocked from side to side and cried: "Arraa-arra. Telephone. Arra-arra. Quick!" and wouldn't repeat the word "Sticker".

"Listen to Kolka Biriukov more. He's probably going to take on another part and pretend he's a parrot," the children laughed. "He doesn't know anything about animals and he calls himself an artist..."

"But what about the elephants? Who told you about the elephant?" Liudmila Nikolayevna stood up for Kolka.

But Kolka didn't listen. Lowering his head, he walked out of the circus and Vitya ran after him.

The Hypnotists

Kolka and Vitya decided to get back their authority over their class-mates. And one day the whole class flew into an uproar.

"Quick! Catch it! Catch it!"

"Careful!"

A chicken, noisily flapping its wings, flew from one desk to another.

Headed by Vitya the children kept overtaking it but the squawking chicken skilfully slipped out of their arms.

Then it landed on Liusya Shustikova's desk.

"Grab it!" Vitya yelled to Liusya.

But Liusya didn't even have time to stretch out her hand before the chicken was on another desk.

"What a coward! She's afraid of chickens," said Kolka.

"Look here, Kolka!" Liusya flared up. "We'll talk about your pranks at the next team meeting. You'll see! Some hypnotist you are! You'd do better to hypnotize yourself so that you don't get fail marks!"

But at this moment Vitya who had grabbed the squawking chicken by the leg, said triumphantly to Kolka: "Go on!"

The children crowded round the teacher's desk. Kolka took the chicken in one hand and with the other slowly stroked its comb and uttered in a loud hiss, "Sleep... Sslee-eep..."

"He's doing passes," Vitya explained to the others who had grown silent.

Kolka hissed in a fury so that everyone in the class could hear: "Passes-eye-glasses, passes-eye-glasses, sleep, chicken, go to sleep, I tell you!"

He turned the chicken over on its back in such a way that its head dangled. Then he gently pressed on its bare crop and the chicken became still. The children kept their eyes glued to it. All of them, even Liusya Shustikova, stared in amazement at the chicken which was lying tensely still.

A couple of minutes later Kolka finally blew on the chicken and it shook itself and jumped up. Vitya caught it at once and put it in his satchel.

"Fan-tas-tic!"

"How do you do it?"

"Can you do it to people?" the children asked.

"Of course, he can!" Vitya answered for his friend.

"Then show us, show us!" Liusya suddenly came up to Kolka. "What's wrong? Go on!" She looked spitefully and provocatively at Kolka.

Kolka's face fell and he glanced anxiously at Vitya, wanting to say something but Vitya hurried to his rescue.

"What are you picking at him for? I told you he could! He's tried it out on me," said Vitya.

"So, you slept like the chicken, then?" Liusya spitefully narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, I did," Vitya retorted confusedly. "So what?"

"So you evidently haven't woken up yet and that's why you keep getting low marks."

The class was split in two. Some asserted that Kolka Biriukov was a boast.

"Look here, artist. Lyonka Gradov's from the circus, too, and is still working now but he doesn't swank. So..."

The others who had crowded round Vitya and Kolka, were still asking questions about the chicken and one of them even suggested drawing a poster for the school concert.

As they were leaving school, Kolka, looked at Liusya who had walked off and felt rather awkward.

"Vitya!"

"What?"

"It somehow came off badly..."

"Why are you bothering about Liusya? Everyone knows she's a silly girl. She's simply angry that all the others sided with us."

But Kolka wanted to talk with Vitya about something quite different. He, of course, felt hurt that Liusya had behaved like that but he was now angry with himself. Why on earth did he have to think up this prank with hypnotism! You see, after the story about how Kolka found circus life hard-going, it really did become hard for him. His class mates didn't believe him although he now tried not to fib. True, he only did so to Liusya who once asked him where he became a pioneer. Kolka didn't think it sounded good enough to say that he enrolled in a Tiumen school which he attended for about twenty days and where he managed to organise a concert. So, he boldly looked Liusya in the eye and said vehemently: "Do you think one can only enroll at schools? Every troupe in our circus has its own branch, you know. Boys and girls from every class are in it. They know me. I myself taught Lyonka Gradov how to write when he was a first-former. And when we planted flowers and shrubs at one school, we brought more than everyone else. Do you know how the seats are made in the circus? Only the first row stands on the ground, you see, and the others go up in tiers higher and higher and the last row is propped up by pillars. There's an empty space down below it. The spectators munch sunflower seeds and that's why there're so many empty shells down there. Only the sunflowers grow there without light and become yellowish and not quite green. You know ... during the war we..."

Then Kolka looked at Liusya and she burst out laughing.

"You've gone a bit too far... During the war you weren't..."

"Not me but our old pioneers in the branch. If you don't believe me, ask anyone you like."

But, of course, there was no one to ask. The branches he'd described didn't exist. Kolka thought them up himself and believed in them. Sometimes he felt that a lie sounded very like the truth.

This happened when he dreamed of something or wanted something.

As he now walked with Vitya along the side-streets, which ran steeply down to the sea, Kolka only wanted one thing: for Liusya to believe him again.

But Vitya was lost in thought. He was imagining how the next day everyone who gathered round the bill-board would read the notice on which the following would be written in red and blue paint:

HYPNOSIS
Performed by Nikolai Biriukov
Assisted by Victor Kadkin

And looking at Kolka walking lost in thought beside him, he smiled. He felt something had happened that day which he had dreamed about for a long time. He so wanted to do something which would make everyone at school talk about him. But until then Vitya hadn't been at all lucky. In the first term when they wrote in the pioneer journal on the subject of "What I Want to Do", Vitya chose three most unusual professions and eventually enfuriated his class-mates to such a degree that they wouldn't let him write anything more in the journal. But now...

As for Kolka, he felt he was a pupil and this new Kolka now wouldn't leave Kolka the artist in peace.

He saw himself standing by the blackboard. His class-mates were staring at him and Liusya Shustikova's hand was stretched out like it was on the school poster entitled: "What have you done for the Pioneer Organisation's fortieth anniversary?" And she said threateningly: "Biriukov! You're not a pioneer, you're a disgrace! A disgrace to our team! All you get is fail marks, one after the other!"

"Wait! Wait! I'll put everything right! I'll tell you about water... You find it everywhere where there's rain and puddles."

"Puddles!!!" His classmates' murmurs rolled across the class like thunder and together with Liusya they all shouted: "Expell him!!!"

Kolka cringed. He was still only imagining this but what if it really came true?

In the morning Kolka came to school feeling somewhat anxious. But seeing happy-looking Vitya by the newsboard, he calmed down. Without looking at the others, he went into the classroom and quietly sat down at his desk. Liudmila Nikolayevna leaned over the journal, straightened her hair and began asking the children questions.

Suddenly Vitya who was sitting by the window, whispered: "Kolka, look!" and pointed to Liusya Shustikova's desk.

The notice, which had only just been hanging on the board was lying in front of Liusya and she was carefully covering the red word "hypnosis" with thick blue ink.

Kolka fidgeted, turned round and was told off twice by Liudmila Nikolayevna and, to crown it all, began talking almost at the top of his voice with Vitya.

"Biriukov, give me your report!" Liudmila Nikolayevna's eyebrows twitched threateningly. "Biriukov!"

As Kolka was going up to the teacher's table, noise broke out in the class.

"Hey, hypnotist!"

"What are you picking on him for?"

"Swank!"

Liudmila Nikolayevna finished writing in Kolka's report book and put down her pen. When the noise died down slightly, she said: "Children! I know about everything and I want to talk to you about it. Has a speck of dust ever got into your eye? Even when you've got it out, your eye still smarts..."

The children looked at one another in surprise.

"It was the same with the chicken," the teacher continued.

"She's now going to say I'm a speck of dust in the class's eyes," Kolka thought and sighed bitterly.

"So that's what happened with the chicken, too. When Biriukov turned it over on its back in such a way that its head was dangling, he gently pressed his finger on its crop and then gently removed his hand. The chicken still thought it was being held down and it was too afraid to move for several minutes. This is called catalepsy. So, children, now I think that each one of you," Liudmila Nikolayevna smiled cheerfully and looked at Kolka and then Vitya, "could become a 'hypnotist' of this kind."

"Liusya, Let's be Friends"

These were boring days for Kolka again, days full of biting remarks, pitying looks, mistrust and fights.

Kolka decided to change the situation by working hard. One day when he had learnt his lesson on literature well, he volunteered to answer the lesson. But strangely enough by the blackboard, Kolka who had never been shy in the ring in front of two thousand pairs of eyes, suddenly became confused for no reason and just managed to get a good mark.

Having decided to amaze the class in the gym lesson, Kolka and Vitya gave a real acrobatic display. Kolka did a handstand on Vitya's knees and then smoothly lowering himself onto the parquet floor, did the splits and Vitya finely completed the picture. He was, as Kolka put it, the background, that is, alternately raised his right and left arm and stood still.

To gain the full effect, Kolka needed a costume and a flood-lit ring. He dreamed of taking his class to the circus but this wasn't possible now. While his mother was ill, Kolka himself was only allowed into the circus with his father to rehearse. That's why all he could do was to look gloomily at his text books and hurriedly do his home-work. Liusya Shustikova went on ignoring him.

"Vitya, were you ever friendly with anyone else?"

"What a question! Of course, I was. Last year I was friendly with Tolik Savin."

"What about with the girls?"

"No, not yet!"

"What do you mean! Isn't four years enough time to make friends in?"

"There hasn't been time. You see, first we thrashed them and

pulled their plaits and then they thrashed us. Our girls, you know, are a strange bunch."

"Really?"

"They certainly are! You just think of them as being sissies but try fighting with them and they're just like boys. And they've got their own way of fighting—they scratch... What's up?... Come out with it straight and say: I've had enough, Vitya, I want to make friends with a girl."

Kolka blushed but kept silent.

"You've swopped me for Liusya Shustikova and still call yourself a friend!"

"What makes you think so? If you like I'll give you my penknife."

"I don't want your penknife..."

"Well, really! Liusya's, of course, a girl but she's a fine person! But then Vitya's a real friend... He's hurt and isn't saying anything," Kolka thought, looking at his friend and feeling sorry for Vitya, suggested: "Hey, let's go to the circus!"

They ran to the circus.

After cunningly slipping through the entrance past a keeper, they rushed into the stables. All the animals were in the same places as usual.

Kolka took Vitya up to a cage where an old red fox was sitting.

"When we arrived there was a tremendous typhoon, remember?"

"It wasn't a typhoon, it was just a heavy rainstorm."

"Oh, alright! The circus was almost destroyed. And afterwards everything was fine except that a fox cub disappeared. We searched everywhere for him! And a few days ago I saw the old fox feeding a cub! Just look."

Kolka threw a roll into the cage. The old fox suddenly began to howl pleadingly and tenderly, just like a vixen calling her cubs and grabbing the piece of roll, jumped into a corner of the cage.

"What's all this? Who gave you permission to feed the animals?" A trainer looked angrily at the confused boys.

"We're not feeding it, we've found the cub..."

"You heroes! You've found the cub. We've been looking for it for two months and they've come along and found it straight away. I'll tell your father and he'll give you what's coming to you!"

"But we're telling the truth. Look."

And sure enough a few minutes later the fox-cub was found. The fatherly instinct of the old fox which in captivity had only seen fox-cubs through the bars of its cage, had suddenly been aroused. He tried to drag the fox-cub into its cage but this was difficult because the gap was narrow and the cub was large. Eventually the cub wounded its paw and got stuck under the cage. However, the feeding routine went on as before: at fixed hours the cub got its share from the old fox.

Kolka and Vitya helped to drag out the cub.

The poor little fox! It had grown without any exercise... Its paws were crooked and weak and its eyes glittered viciously.

"You'll have to look after the cub yourselves, boys," said the trainer. "You found it, so you'll train it, too. It can still be cured and made into an artist. I hope my trainer colleagues agree that it's theirs?"

"Yes, we do," the boys replied in unison.

They were happy to become trainers. Suddenly Kolka said: "Let's get Liusya Shustikova to help us."

"Liusya again?"

"Don't you want to? I won't bring you to the circus any more, then."

Vitya thought for a moment and then said reluctantly: "We'll have to write her a note."

"I won't take it."

"Are you afraid? It was you who wanted her, after all."

"So, let's write it then."

Kolka tore a page out of his exercise-book and wrote: "Dear Liusya, let's be friends. We've got a fox-cub. We're going to train it and you'll help us. Kolka. Vitya."

The boys set off for Liusya's house. Kolka folded the note and threw it but it fell short of the window.

"We'll have to take it upstairs."

Kolka stayed by the entrance while Vitya went up to the second floor.

Five minutes went by. Liusya's window was wide-open but you couldn't see anything from the street. There was a drain-pipe by the window. Without a moment's hesitation Kolka climbed up the pipe as if it were a circus pole and when he reached Liusya's window, he heard: "It's tastier with jam. You'd do better to take some jam."

"Thanks. I'm full up as it is."

Kolka shouted out in indignation: "Vitya, you come out right now!"

Liusya looked out of the window and was so shocked that she opened her mouth but couldn't scream. Kolka looked down. A crowd had gathered by the drain-pipe. Craning their necks, the people were calling anxiously: "Careful! Come down gently..."

Liusya only gasped but seeing her, Kolka cheerfully smiled and flew down in a trace.

But he didn't land on the ground because his legs got entangled in all the arms stretching upwards.

"Found nothing better to do! You could have broken your neck!"

"Let the boy go. He knows he's been foolish."

While the grown-ups were arguing angrily about children's upbringing, Kolka pushed his way out of the crowd and was soon sitting cheerfully and contentedly next to Liusya.

Liusya sewed up his jacket, Vitya ate jam, slowly rinsing it down with tea and Kolka read a book aloud. When Liusya gave him back his jacket, Kolka politely thanked her and seeing the empty buckets, offered to fetch some water.

"You somehow seem different today," Liusya said.

At first Kolka felt offended but after a few moments' thought, he decided that it was perhaps a good thing that he was different.

The Departure

Kolka had never felt so miserable in all his life before. He used to treat his school-friends in the same way as cinema films: he saw them for twenty or thirty days in a row while he went to school and then when he left, he forgot them or if he liked them, tried to imitate them.

It was so strange! No matter what happened at a school, it affected Kolka only slightly and seemed as uninteresting and boring as his father's reprimands at rehearsals. Kolka enjoyed being popular. He gained success by smiling or free passes, but he didn't understand his friends and was indifferent to their joys and cares because they weren't "his".

Now Kolka thought about his friends and school all the time. He perhaps started to think about them because he was already eleven, or perhaps because he had lived in this town which was so unusual and large and from which ships travelled to all the ends of the world longer than in other towns, and he had had time to mature.

Kolka enjoyed watching the sailors being met and seen off at the port. They were met and seen off in a completely different way to Kolka and his parents.

Kolka resentfully spoke about this to his mother. This feeling of resentment seethed inside Kolka although he couldn't explain why.

"We're never met like that," he complained sadly to his mother.

"It's just because we arrive and leave too often. We're artists, you see," she would reply. "And then, you see, they are met by their relatives... The sailors haven't seen their country for a long time. They're happy because they're returning home..."

Home... Until quite recently Kolka's home had been a chest full of the usual things he knew so well but now he thought that home meant far more. Home meant this town, its streets and sea, the people who seemed like relatives, Vitya and Liusya and the school... Home was Vladivostok.

Yes, Kolka really had changed. But this new life had hardly begun for him when they started talking about leaving.

They were leaving just as the more interesting things started happening and Kolka stopped thinking about his endless run of low marks. Everyone was getting ready for the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the Pioneer organisation. And there wouldn't just be one celebration! First there'd be one at the school, then in the town and then further and further away and, finally, the biggest, most special one would be held in Moscow! How he'd like to get to it!

Moscow! Kolka had only passed through Moscow on the way somewhere but he had never lived there for long. His father said he would have to work very hard before he performed in the capital's ring and then he always added sadly: "How can we get anywhere with a lazy-bones like you?"

"Oh, Daddy! If I lived here in Vladivostok longer, I most likely would get to Moscow. We've got a fantastic class! I'm bound to be sent as a rep to the celebrations: I hardly ever get low marks and we collected more scrap metal than any other class. Our flowers are always the best because Vitya's grandmother's a gardener and somehow we'll get some carrier pigeons... And when I get my salary I'll give it all to the class. We'll buy some pigeons and even train them." No, Kolka didn't want to leave.

Each time Kolka thought about it, he'd take Vitya to some remote corner of the town and confide in him, man to man, frankly and straightforwardly. They usually went to the mouth of the river Lianchikhe.

When Kolka said: "Let's got to the Lianchikhe," he meant he needed to talk about something important. They would sit on the bank for a long time tossing pebbles into the river. No one fished there any more and it was quiet and deserted. The trees had lost leafage and the leaves left on them were like laundry forgotten by women in heavy rain.

"You know, when I come here next time, we'll build a hut and live here, alright?" Kolka suggested.

"Next time! You'd do better not to leave. There're so many fish here in summer! Right here where we're sitting."

"Why?"

"What a thing to ask!" Vitya ran up to the water's edge and scooping up a little in his palm, offered it to Kolka: "Taste it!"

Kolka licked it.

"Well, do you see?"

Kolka was puzzled.

"D'you mean it smells of fish?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"No, it's just not salty. And over there in the sea, on the contrary, it's wonderful: the water's not very salty and there's plenty of food for the fish. In an hour you can catch a whole basket of them. Don't leave, Kolka. We'll get by and somehow find things to eat! Perhaps it's school you don't like?"

"Yes, I do," said Kolka firmly. He felt he was telling the truth.

Everything was now going fine for Kolka at school except that in the natural science lesson on almost the last but one day of the term Liudmila Nikolayevna had given him a low mark for conduct and had written in his report: "Ate the exhibits during the lesson." Kolka had felt angry. He returned home gloomy and kept muttering to Vitya:"Ate the exhibits! Really, it was she who gave us just ten grains of corn and I sit in the back row. Was I to blame that only three got as far as me?"

"It's always the same: if you're not to blame, you always get into trouble," Vitya asserted.

They were both in a bad mood.

"But you won't be coming back soon, will you, Kolka?"

"In about three years' time. But perhaps you'll come and stay with us in the holidays? After all, we've decided to join a circus study group together. Well, what about it, Vitya?"

"Yes, but you won't be here for such a long time," whispered Vitya in a cheerless tone. "Let's go to the sea!" he suddenly suggested and ran off without waiting for an answer.

Kolka understood Vitya and he didn't want to part with him either. When his mother was doing the last bit of packing, he chose the best photo of himself in his costume and signed it: "A keepsake for Vitya from Nikolai Biriukov."

After a moment's thought, he wanted to add: "You don't discover your friends in noisy conversations..." but deciding that only girls wrote things of that sort, he carefully traced out: "Vitya, write often to me!!!"

The whole class saw Kolka off. Liudmila Nikolayevna and Vitya brought some flowers and an album with the following inscription: "As a keepsake from School No. 1."

Kolka leaned against the window-pane and keenly looked at his friends' faces, Liudmila Nikolayevna waved her hand at him and made some signs. Kolka didn't understand what she meant but nodded and kept looking at his classmates but for some reason or other he could only see his first friend Vitya.

The iron railing on which the curtain was hanging had already flown off several times. The circus agent handed his father the tickets and said goodbye but Kolka was oblivious to everything. He was thinking that he would only come back to Vladivostok in about three years' time and his classmates would, of course, have forgotten him by then.

He had perhaps never before looked so sadly and with such special interest out of the carriage window. He wanted to remember everything: the bay, the pebbles and the grey ragged jellyfish.

The train moved off. A waitress with a large basket, followed by a postman glided along the narrow corridor into the buffet-car.

"Stamps, envelopes!" he said in a bass, shaking the tray of scattered envelopes.

"Give me two dozen!" said Kolka and after buying the envelopes, he went away from the window.

In the compartment his mother had already put a thermos flask and some mineral water on the table.

Kolka walked in casually and even tried to put his hand into his pockets but they were stuffed so full of shells and seaside pebbles that there was no room for his hands.

"Do you want to eat something?" his mother asked.

He only shook his head.

"I can see you're upset about something, aren't you?"

"No-o!" drawled Kolka and thought that at this moment in a class holiday programme Vitya would probably be reciting the verses which the class had written together and Kolka had been assiduously learning for two weeks.

It was most likely the first time Kolka had wanted to be an ordinary boy, go to the same school every day, stay with Vitya and Liusya and get ready for the celebrations. You see, even if their class didn't go to Moscow, they'd send carrier pigeons there. Perhaps some of the pigeons would come back. They would eagerly wait for them and carefully sprinkle food on the school window-sill every day.

But only Kolka Biriukov would not be waiting for them. Why? The carriage windows weren't the school window-sill: the pigeons would be returning home to Vladivostok.

When his father helped his mother to unpack the picnic hamper, Kolka stopped looking out the window.

"Oh well, so we may always be on the move but at least I'm doing something worthwhile, too. And one day I will be a real artist!" Kolka suddenly thought and reached for a sandwich.

And again for some time ahead he would hear the familiar rattle of the carriage wheels, which unlike before sometimes sounded cheerful and sometimes, as at that moment, sad.

The Death of Old Jumbo

Old Jumbo the elephant woke up.

Ruffled up in their cages the birds were still dozing but the marten was already pacing regularly like a pendulum from wall to wall, stretching its legs.

Jumbo didn't want to get up. At night the elephant used to lie on its side, sprinkling wood-shavings and hay over itself and his kind dark-blue eye only closed when he had warmed himself up under his self-made blanket. Jumbo's friend, Toni, a young acrobat, was always by his side. He no longer worried about Jumbo if the black, brush-like bristles of the elephant's eye-lashes which were just as prickly and elastic as the horse-hair in the frock-coat of his master, Ketske, were closed and the elephant was sleeping lying down.

But yesterday Jumbo woke up without any shavings or hay on his back. Hungry and tired, he stubbornly stood, clanking on the chain which was attached to the dirty plank floor, and refused to lie down.

Toni knew that if Jumbo wasn't going to lie down and instead spent days without any sleep, he would become bad-tempered, and afraid of this happening, his master Ketske would force him to lie down. Toni felt sorry for old Jumbo and stroked him as tenderly as he could and whispered: "Lie down, Jumbo! Lie down, do you hear! You know, don't you, that Ketske is going to come and if he sees you standing at night, he'll curse and beat you with a riding-crop. Lie down, Jumbo!"

But the elephant stubbornly swayed from side to side and wouldn't obey the little lad fearlessly hugging his huge leg, which

was like a moss-covered, porous tree-stump. Toni kept pleading to the elephant to lie down. Eventually Jumbo did as he was told. All night Jumbo stirred loudly and looked wearily with his wide-open eyes at Toni.

In the morning the little lad was awoken by the scraping sound of a curry-comb. A stable-hand was grooming the horse of Mary the circus rider.

Toni got up and ran to his rehearsal. Everyone in the troupe had already assembled here and only Ketske, the troupe leader, wasn't anywhere in sight. The manager was discussing something with Ganti the clown. Mary unleashed the safety rope—a long, frayed cord which supported the acrobats when they jumped. Shortly afterwards Ketske arrived. He sat down on the barrier, clasped his head in his hands and calling Toni, said hoarsely: "Fetch me some water, quick!"

"Look here, Ketske! You've sat down on the barrier again! You know that's an omen that the circus won't perform to full houses..." drawled Ganti the clown, gloomily looking at the tips of his worn-down boots.

"Stop nagging! I've had enough without you nagging," Ketske yelled at him. And an ingratiating grin at once appeared on the old clown's face.

Toni handed his master a mug and glanced at the clown. He knew that Ganti was only kept in the troupe because they couldn't find another clown. More than once the little lad had heard the manager say to Ketske: "We'll have to think... Perhaps we can invite so-and-so", and he named a famous clown but looking keenly at Ketske, at once added: "But you know yourself that'll mean more money and they fly off the handle very easily and then you can't speak to them."

Toni didn't know exactly what he meant by that but he was sure the clown would never "fly off" because he was too old and sick, could hardly walk and never did anything dangerous.

Spluttering, Ketske drank the water and his eyes flashing gloomily at Toni, he walked over to the rope ladder. The whites of his eyes looked as if they were covered with a net of reddish veins and sometimes Toni thought they looked like two bloody rolling balls.

Toni sighed and climbed up the other ladder to untie the trapeze.

Lost in thought, Mary looked at the ring. The rope, quivering convulsively in her hands forced her to keep a constant eye on Toni's movements. He seized the handle-bars of the trapeze and flew towards Ketske. The rope stretched and Mary instinctively ran forward.

"What am I doing?" she thought but it was too late: Toni fell into the net.

Ketske was swinging smoothly overhead, almost at the top of the circus dome where the ropes were tangled in a mess and the rusty hooks for hanging the equipment were sticking out.

"Get a move on, then," he hurried Toni.

Toni scrambled up the ladder again to the platform and pushed the trapeze. Suddenly Ketske hurled himself jerkily at it and landed beside Toni.

"Aaah... Get off!" A desperate cry rang out under the dome.

The platform shook. Toni shrieked and struggled in the acrobat's sinewy arms.

"What's happened?"

"Ketske's beating the little lad again. He really is a queer bloke, that Ketske. He can't live through a day without beating," said Mary.

"That's the only way to teach 'em. Didn't we used to get it hot in our day?" Ganti the clown remarked indifferently. "Let him beat him — he'll become suppler."

The rehearsal was interrupted. Mary pulled the rope towards the platform. Mustering his last ounces of strength, Toni dodged away from Ketske and dropped downwards like a stone. Feeling the shavings under his feet, Toni opened his eyes, jumped up and ran like the wind to the elephant's stable.

"Jumbo!" he moaned, clinging to the elephant's tough grey skin.

His pursuers were drawing near. He could already hear Ketske's heavy tread and the tapping sound of Mary's wooden shoes.

"Don't you dare touch the little lad!" she yelled.

"Why talk so upperty like? Toni's only a roving artist like we are, dearie," Ganti the clown pulled a face. The wrinkled, flabby old man stayed on the side, waiting to see how this highly amusing incident would end.

Toni clinged to the elephant tighter and tighter as if looking for some protection and cried bitterly. Sensing something bad had

happened, Jumbo flapped his ears, raised his trunk high and roared threateningly. Ketske stepped back in fright. Jumbo roared increasingly more loudly and bellicosely. Picking up some cold mud with his trunk, he sprayed it on the intruders, who scattered in all directions. From a distance Ketske looked helplessly and spitefully at the boy and the elephant.

He didn't dare to go into the stable.

Jumbo looked terrifying. His small eyes were blood-shot and his wrinkled trunk swayed to and fro. Now and then he lowered it and sprayed Toni with warm, sticky saliva.

"Oh, damn!" Ketske cursed and wandered off.

"That's St. Nicholas' Day for you!" whispered Toni, sinking onto the dirty plank floor...

... The bells slowly peeled. Their monotonous chimes, coming from the street, filled the gloomy circus building with sound and reminded Toni of something precious.

"It's mother".

Toni could vaguely see her in his mind's eye. The dim light of the lamp lit up the icon. His mother's large, sad eyes were fixed on the image.

"Lord, Lord!" her lips murmured. "Help my son, save him from adversity and evil people. Lord, Lord..."

The bells chimed. His mother got up from her knees and came over to her five-year-old Anton. Toni still remembered the bitter smell of her clothes and the tender caress of her rough, blistered hands.

His mother took a hunk of bread, broke it and put the larger piece in the bag. Then, after a moment's thought she stuffed the rest in there. His blind old grandfather bustled about with his knapsack and then stretched out his hand to Toni and Toni led him. They went out of the hut. The bells were peeling resonantly. His mother and his grandmother wailed and his frightened younger brothers and sisters cried.

It was quiet outside. The village seemed to have been deserted. Then Toni led his grandfather a long, long way.

One cold day, yes, exactly six years ago, on St. Nicholas' Day Toni and his grandfather stood at the market. The boy was frozen stiff but persistently went on begging: "Help us, for the love of Christ!"

A little way off a gentleman stopped, stared at the little lad, beckoned to him and Toni ran joyfully towards him.

Suddenly the gentleman seized hold of him and carried him off. Anton began screaming. His grandfather raised his stick and began waving it helplessly. And that was all. Anton became "Toni" and the gentleman who took him to the circus was Ketske.

This noisy, bright new world stunned Toni and made him forget his mother and grandfather for a while. But where, in fact, were they? Where was his village? Toni neither knew its name nor its whereabouts. He'd forgotten long ago how many times he had moved places. His mother had probably cried her eyes out waiting for him.

Remembering this, Toni began crying even louder. He felt hurt although he really didn't know why. Everything, you see, was the same as usual. The armful of hay was the same, so were the filthy stables which for six years had served as his shelter. That day Toni was just as hungry as the day before and the day before that. For many days now Ketske hadn't given him any money for his lunch and the market-women were very keen-sighted. If they caught him, he would get it hot. The carrots in Jumbo's feed were rotten and revolting to hold but he had to eat them together with Jumbo.

It was hard to say how and when the little acrobat Toni and Jumbo the huge elephant became such close, inseparable friends. It probably happened when Jumbo suddenly lay down, stopped eating his food and only groaned heavily.

No one then attempted to come to the elephant's aid and only little Toni who was losing his baby teeth thought: "Perhaps Jumbo's got tooth-ache."

Toni found it incredibly hard lifting the trunk and shaking the elephant's bad tooth loose. The tooth fell out and a new one soon grew. Toni was amazed but decided that this was quite normal.

If the elephant could have talked he would most likely have told the little lad that elephants change their teeth every five years.

But perhaps they became friends when a mouse appeared in the elephant's stable. Spotting the squeaky creature, Jumbo suddenly began to rush about and roar with fear. Toni again came to the elephant's rescue, and chased the mouse out of the stable. The boy

couldn't understand why this huge elephant was afraid of a tiny mouse. How could Toni know that if this mouse got up the elephant's trunk, it could easily nibble through his thin nasal bone and then Toni would lose his only friend.

Toni became deeply attached to Jumbo just as he was to the circus. He loved his travelling home and enjoyed moving about. Each new town was for him like a magician's chest which contained all sorts of incredible mysterious things.

Toni was a cheerful lad and quite at home in the circus. Although Ketske called him a little tramp, Toni knew that he often spoke highly of him to the clown: "You know, this boy backs up what I thought. Really! Only a tramp is right for the circus. First of all, he's full of life; secondly, he's agile and roguish. Well then, if he's a rogue, he must know how to put on an act... Hey, Toni, come here! What's more, look he's not bad-looking."

The clown looked obsequiously at Toni as if he were a novelty. The little lad's tousled dusty hair was blond, his green eyes were expressive and his translucent pale skin enhanced his touching delicate frame.

"Not bad! Not bad at all! You've got an eye for material," Ganti the clown would say ingratiatingly to Ketske. "What's more, don't forget, he's willing and hard-working. Not bad at all!"

True, when Toni was full, he readily carried out any instructions and even in an extremely funny way imitated anyone whom he happened to see.

Mary was the only one Toni couldn't imitate because her face was always different.

And Toni regarded Mary differently, too. Sometimes he liked her very much. For instance, when she instinctively treated the little lad tenderly or defended him from Ketske who was always drunk.

Mary lived near the circus in a tiny room and everything in it looked just like what Toni had seen in her circus dressing-room. Here, too, strewn about were lipstick-smeared cigarette butts and torn posters. Only the corridor she shared with her loud-mouthed old landlady was completely different. The old woman was always cursing and threatening Mary: "If you take any liberties, I'll kick you out! Oh, you little devil, you're disgracing my house! I'll kick you out, I really will!"

But Mary ignored her, shrugged her shoulders with irritation and took Toni into her room where she fed him the left-overs of yesterday's supper and picking up the stale, mouldy crusts of bread, gave them to him for Jumbo.

Then Mary would begin to tell him stories. She spoke fast and always in a loud whisper and somehow imploringly looked down at Toni. At moments like these Toni felt unusually strong. He boldly stroked her burning, moist hands and although he didn't understand much of what she told him, he still pitied Mary and decided that whatever happened, he'd revenge her for everything. He even imagined how he would get even with their master Ketske, the clown and the manager, and they all at once seemed spiteful and cowardly like wild animals under a trainer's whip.

Mary spoke for a long time. When she grew tired, she fell silent. Then Toni began asking her questions but turning her wax-like face towards him, Mary stared indifferently at the little boy and kept silent.

And then Toni felt young and pathetic again. He only wanted not to be turned out. He would quietly creep to the window which was on ground-level. People walked past but only their feet were visible. You could see all of them on the other side of the street where they seemed small as if Toni was not looking at them from a window but from his trapeze under the dome.

True, there was a difference but not a very big one. From the dome people looked flat and from here they looked straight. But both here and there they reminded Toni of lifeless toys. After looking out of the window, Toni left unnoticed and no one kept him back.

And every time Toni said to himself that he would never return here and that Mary was just as spiteful as the others. But she only had to beckon to the little lad and he followed her again because here he was given inadvertently a little of the human warmth which Ketske, when he tore him away from his grandfather on that memorable day, had forever deprived him of. You see, no one except Jumbo was tender to the boy. And so when Toni felt very sad, he always went to good, old Jumbo. Hugging the elephant's trunk, Toni tried to sob out all his troubles. Jumbo's rugged trunk somehow replaced his mother's warm and tender arms.

So, too, that day as he cried by Jumbo's side, Toni wanted

to share his thoughts with Mary and tell her about the strange feeling which was tormenting him like hunger pains. But as usual Mary wasn't interested in little Toni's troubles. Her eyes were sadly fixed on the window and she didn't even notice the familiar worn boots which were slowly marking time.

Toni left Mary. Somewhere behind him he could hear the clear broken voices of newspaper boys shouting: "Attention! Lorberbaum's animal circus! Attention! Jumbo the mad elephant is to be shot!"

But Toni didn't even take any notice of their cries. He was well aware that all these boys shouted were lies. Last year, for instance, before Shrovetide, these boys had also shouted: "Hurry, everyone! Hurry! Hurry! The animal circus! You'll laugh whether you want to or not!"

And the audience piled into the circus but laughed very little and even the old clown didn't help. For a long time afterwards the manager had to hide from furious crowds of visitors.

"Crooks!" they shouted. "If you take our money you should make us laugh and smile but you've just swindled and bored us! Crooks!"

At that time they made out that Jumbo was mad. It happened like this. Quite simply a man in checked trousers convinced Ketske that if his artful fib about the 'mad elephant' was spread about, Ketske would never be poor again. He'd be rich. This man got Ketske to show him how Jumbo defended little Toni and then went and wrote in the newspaper that Jumbo had gone mad and should be shot.

Toni remembered how their small troupe began to worry. The manager kept going to the governor. Then, when articles about the mad elephant began appearing more and more frequently in the press, letters started being sent to the circus from all over the district. Sometimes the envelopes were richly embossed with the sender's seal but more often than not they were scruffy and plain.

Ketske couldn't read. Mary would rather listen than try to decipher someone's scrawl and so the manager read most of them. They cheered him up because some were very amusingly written. One day a merchant asked to be sent the elephant to breed a new strain of pig. However, these letters less interested the manager

than those in which people sent their last pennies to help save the valuable animal.

Taking out the money, the manager rubbed his hands and laughed merrily: "The fools! No, these fools have got to be seen! We'll make a million out of this story with Jumbo. This wretched newspaper man has given me an idea, he has..." Then he divided the money, slapped Ketske on the shoulder and walked off.

Ketske, as always, stuffed the money in his pocket and shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

Little Toni knew that Ketske didn't like people and was even afraid of them. He was in general a coward. This was particularly noticeable when he was sober and especially mean. True, this happened rarely and Toni got into far worse trouble than usual with his master, but he was so used to the beatings that he took as little notice of them as of the boys' shouts of "Hurry! Hurry! Tomorrow the mad elephant Jumbo will be shot at the firing range."

The market square on which the shabby circus building was situated, became quiet towards evening. Now and then a solitary passer-by would appear from somewhere but would then vanish instantly into a side-street. There were now less articles about mad Jumbo: everyone had got used to it and no one sent any money anymore. Nothing — neither the brightly-coloured poster not the pushing manager's intrigues — did anything to help. The circus was as empty as before.

It was damp in the cold circus. In the mornings the discordant roars of the hungry animals rang out from the stables and in the evenings the circus was full of artists. Bad-tempered and shivering with cold, they jumped about and did their tricks before a handful of idlers who had wandered in by chance and after the performances they loudly swore for a long time, cursing everyone and everything under the sun.

Little Toni was afraid that something dreadful was going to happen at this time and this made him want to close his eyes so as not to see the brightly flood-lit ring, strangely made-up faces nor hear the rowdy music and raucous commands: "Allez-up!"

Toni didn't like the first two acts in which the acrobats, trick-cyclists and jugglers performed. He himself had to fly on the trapeze

at the very top of the circus. But when the animals came out into the ring, Toni enjoyed watching every movement.

And it really was impossible not to enjoy watching the huge elephants which smoothly danced the waltz, did handstands and agilely stood on their heads!

The clever bear-cubs had fun sawing wood and riding the horses. The stern-looking camels grandly drummed with their hooves. Accompanying them, extremely comic monkeys turned the handle of a hirdy-girdy, and a donkey smugly serenaded to their music.

And yet Jumbo worked better than everyone else. He knew how to count, and lifted the required number of sticks from the rug on the trainer's instructions. He lightly walked across tubs, gently carrying a graceful ballerina on his head.

Jumbo merrily danced a gypsy dance, jangling fake necklaces. This act always delighted the audience who loudly whooped and stamped their feet and sometimes even threw titbits to Jumbo.

Toni always felt happy when his friend was a success. That day, as he walked through the town, he stopped by every fence covered with posters, from which his good friend Jumbo with his trunk joyfully raised looked down at him.

The little lad couldn't read. Who was there to teach him? Jumbo, his good, faithful friend, you see, was only an elephant.

Toni wanted to find out what these different coloured letters said about his friend but he was too afraid to ask anyone. From a distance he could see how people's faces were burning with curiosity and how they shook their heads in surprise and hurried to the circus box-office. This made Toni even happier. There hadn't been such good audiences at the circus for a long time.

At the cross-roads Toni looked round and not seeing anyone, tore off a poster, carefully hid it in his bosom and whistling, rushed towards the circus.

"Where have you been messing about?" a voice boomed above him. "We're not working today, you know..."

Ketske wanted to say something else, raised his eye-brows significantly but only hiccupped loudly.

"Go to the dressing-room on the double! I don't want to set eyes on you!" he shouted at Toni having decided that he was the cause of his hiccups.

Ketske was drunk. Toni had only just moved when he stopped him again.

"See?" Ketske slapped his pocket. "My pockets are stuffed full! Do you really want to eat? Here, you rascal! Ha ha ha... How's Ketske for you? Ketske's kind... Here..."

Toni felt the cold coin on his palm and quickly slipped through the door.

Puffing and panting, he ran into the changing-room.

Packing was already well underway there. Costumes were lying in an untidy pile on the floor. The long tights were soiled and ugly. The starched ruffs were yellow and creased. The tops of the boxes were open and this rubbish was being tossed in.

The posters and cards had already been ripped off the dressing-room walls and now these bare walls reminded Toni of the clown's pallid face when he wasn't wearing make-up.

An open box of sweets lay on the planks which served as a kind of table. A whole row of bottles were standing in the corner.

"Where's all this come from?" Toni knitted his brows.

He was irritated by Mary's loud, unnatural laughter. She was clasping a glass of liquer in her hand and, clinking glasses with the clown, was laughing at something.

"Oh! There you are, Anton," Mary turned to the boy. "Do have some sweets."

"What politeness! 'Anton!'" grinned the clown. "Why call him by his Russian name? Toni's quicker, more fashionable and doggy-like. Ha-ha! Aren't I right, my dear little Russian Masha?"

"No you're not!" Mary took offense. "You here, you're no more Italian than I am and I don't like clever talk! It doesn't suit you. You'd do better to tell us how they're going to kill the elephant."

"Ssh! Oh, you women! Talkativeness is the source of all vices." The clown looked apprehensively at Toni and smirked. "We're given a box on the ears but the elephant's going to get hit behind his ears where it hurts most... Here, Toni, drink to Jumbo... Oh, Jumbo, you're our saviour."

"Thank heavens at least we'll get out of this hole," sighed Mary, passing the sweets tin to Toni.

All the sweets had been nibbled. Toni mechanically chose a large chocolate and drank what he had been given in one go.

A few minutes later his head began spinning and his legs became heavier. He glanced at Mary but she suddenly began to seem blurred. He soon couldn't hear anything.

Toni dreamed that he had learned to speak the elephants' language. Jumbo was telling him about his life outside captivity and about the delicious juicy grass in the jungles and their friendly herd.

One only had to be afraid of hunters in the jungle: they knew that the most vulnerable part of the elephants' body was the delicate bone behind the ears. That's why elephants were more afraid of their gun shots than of snake bites and the natives' spears.

Toni talked with Jumbo for a long time. Then sighing heavily, they both thought about their present life in the foul-smelling stables. Jumbo complained to Toni about evil people. Realising that their blows were like ant bites for the elephants, they had invented a stick with a nail at the end.

Oh, if only Toni knew how it hurt Jumbo when the sharp sticks were stuck into his skin!

"Jumbo," Toni suddenly said to the elephant, "let's run far away to the jungle... or no, to a place where there aren't any circuses or hunters."

"Don't you see that's impossible, my friend?" Sadly shaking his head, Jumbo raised his hind leg which was bound to a stake by a massive iron chain.

"Oh no, Jumbo, that was invented by evil people, too. They invented it on purpose so that you thought people were stronger than you and that they've chained you so that you can never leave. But pull hard... like this. That's right, do it again! Hurrah, let's run!"

Toni took Jumbo by his trunk and the wonderful dream ended. Toni turned over onto his back and the poster fell out of his shirt.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry! The mad elephant Jumbo will be shot at the firing-range tomorrow," read the clown and loudly clinking his glass with Mary, he downed the liquer...

Toni woke up. The sun's rays pierced through the dusty window and fell on the silver chocolates, scattering brightly across the dressing-room.

Toni grabbed a few sweets and rushed towards the doors.

"Where are you going? Jumbo doesn't need your chocolates any more," said Mary, sobbing.

Toni grabbed her hand and whispered: "Where's Jumbo?"

"The scoundrels! The rogues!" Mary suddenly began to shout. "Oh, Anton, Anton!" She wrung her hands and groaned: "If only you could understand what a disgusting thing they're about to do!"

"Where's Jumbo? Where's Jumbo?" Toni kept repeating.

"What are you shouting for? Your Jumbo's better off than we are. He's probably already in the next world." And Mary burst into floods of tears.

"They've killed him? It's not true!" shrieked Toni.

"Not true? They're capable of doing anything. They went and announced that your elephant was mad. And what does the audience care? You can only see an elephant being killed once in a blue moon... They've come in flocks... They've already taken an incredible amount of money at the firing-range and will still take even more. Oh, that foul manager never even dreamed of getting so much!" Mary's shoulders began shaking and she again burst into tears. "But we don't need this sort of money, it's wicked to take it..."

"They've killed Jumbo?"

"No they've probably only just taken him to the firing-range."

The crowd at the firing-range was buzzing and moving about restlessly. Toni dived into the centre and quickly began nudging his way through. No, he couldn't get to the front. It became harder and harder to push his way through the solid ring of idlers. To the left of Toni a woman in a patterned shawl was pestering her neighbour and gabbling: "When they begin selling, take it at once."

"Takes me for a fool, does she!" a thin workman snapped. "Wants me to waste the few coins I've earned on this muck!"

"What are they selling please?" civil servant standing nearby enquired.

"Haven't you 'eard? Elephant's hair and skin. People say, you know, it brings good luck and cures all illnesses just like that," the woman explained quickly.

"But doesn't it matter he's mad? And aren't they asking a lot?" the civil servant kept on.

"Look, dearies, there're the soldiers!" an old woman's voice wailed nearby.

A platoon of soldiers come out onto the range. A foppish young officer exchanged a couple of words with the manager. The clown who had come up explained something to the soldiers. The crowd began to get agitated and edge forwards.

The cause of this excitement was tied by chains to four posts and calmly munching cabbage leaves. Jumbo wasn't in the least alarmed by this large crowd of people. He had got used to performing outside the ring, too, and was waiting for his trainer who still hadn't appeared and for some reason he couldn't hear any music.

Suddenly Jumbo pricked up his ears and stood still. A familiar voice was calling his name very nearby! The elephant began roaring joyfully. Toni rushed onto the range.

Getting his breath back, Toni looked round and seeing the pit in which the elephant was standing, shouted: "Don't you dare, don't you dare kill Jumbo! He's good, he's clever! Don't you dare! He's not a mad elephant..." His voice broke but he went on shouting. He wanted everyone to hear him shouting and to realise that he couldn't live without Jumbo. Let them see how he, little Toni, runs up to Jumbo and takes the elephant by the trunk, and they'd all realise the elephant was healthy and wasn't even dangerous with children.

Jumbo was restrained by the heavy chains. Treading from one foot to the other, the elephant stretched out his trunk towards Toni.

"That would be the last straw! Why are they taking so long!" the manager hissed.

"Attention!" Smiling smugly the officer raised his hand in a white glove.

"But the lad, sir..." his subordinate said confusedly.

"What did I say!" the officer roared.

"Where's Ketske?" the manager asked nervously.

"Ketske's been drinking for the repose of the soul of Jumbo his saviour since the morning," smirked Ganti the clown and nodding ingratiatingly to the manager, hurried towards Toni.

Toni fought and bit and screamed. A few people came out of the crowd.

"Help! The lad's gone mad!" the clown panted. "Quick! Quick!"

Toni was dragged to one side. A discordant volley rang out and everything became mixed up: Jumbo's wheeze, the crowd's roar

and the intermittant shots. Toni hung weakly in someone's arms.

"Has he had it? Where shall I take him?" asked a strapping lad.

"To the circus, my dear," the clown waved his hand impatiently and shoving a coin in the dumbstruck boy's hand, disappeared.

The following day the troupe left the town but without good old Jumbo and the little acrobat Toni. The former was remembered until the manager's money ran out and the latter was often recalled by Mary especially whenever she mended the costumes which Toni cut to pieces to revenge his friend Jumbo.

This story would have completely vanished without trace if it hadn't been for an old, yellow sheet of an Odessa newspaper with a heading in large type: "Hurry! Hurry! The mad elephant Jumbo to be shot at the firing-range tomorrow."

Dear reader, after this sad story about Jumbo the elephant I want you to cheer up by reading the amusing stories about the four-legged and feathered friends who were always around me no matter where I was living or what I was doing.

The Children's Theatre

I want to tell you about the district in which I live and where my much loved Children's Theatre began. It was founded in the back-yard of a huge new apartment block which was built in a south-west district of Moscow.

However, first of all let me say a few words about my apartment block. We caught sight of it as soon as the scaffolding had been removed. We knew we would soon be living here and that was why we walked trembling with anticipation.

The empty eight-storey house looked grandly at us through its clean windows as if saying 'hello'. It was no laughing matter to joyfully greet six thousand people — a microcosm of life — and make all sorts of different people friends and neighbours.

We looked reverently and happily at the house and the pigeons, its first inhabitants, which had already settled cheerfully and efficiently on the balconies and window-sills.

The sun was setting but we remained standing there, oblivious to this. When the crimson sun, as if by agreement with the neon advertisement and traffic lights, cast its reflection across the windows, a little girl, misled by the sparkling, impatiently shouted: "Granny, look, they're celebrating New Year's! Look, everyone's celebrating!"

And that was how on the eve of summer each of us suddenly celebrated the New Year.

Lucky for Some, Unlucky for Others

"Excuse me, you haven't got an extra... spare... um... kitten?" I was asked by a confused-looking man standing by his car which was loaded with furniture.

"What?" I asked in amazement.

"Would you believe it, I let two kittens slip by! They whipped them away right under my nose," he exclaimed angrily lifting a metal key ring in his hand to which some keys just like those from my new flat were already wisely attached.

"Vasya, explain what's the matter clearly! You see, the lady's muddled," someone inside the car said and then the door opened and I saw a man's rubber boot poking out from under two-layered skirt and then the thick fold of a spring coat and a commanding old woman stood up in front of us.

"This is my mother-in-law," the man sighed and confusedly began saying: "You see, she says that if a cat first walks across the floor, the house will at once feel like a home."

"Well, of course," said his mother-in-law, "this is an old custom. Cats are supposed to bring good luck to a new house."

"She doesn't want to go into the flat. If you give her a cat, everything will be alright. I bought her an aquarium but that won't do the trick."

"I'm not the only one, you know, Vasya. Look, everyone's carrying a cat in their arms and nobody's protested and said that I'm being daft!" grumbled the old woman, looking triumphantly at the new arrivals.

The back-yard was just like a pet market. New tenants kept arriving with dogs and nervous cats with different markings but almost all of the same breed — plain yard cats. My Angora cat, Fluff, looked even more pompous and important here.

"But look here, you've got a lot of pets: two dogs, a parrot and a tom-cat. There's no sense in you keeping the cat, especially as you'll have a dog in the same flat. Just think about it," the man began convincingly.

"You see, it's my work. I'm a trainer. Fluff, Wag and Jacko are artists."

"Well perhaps you could lend us the cat, then? For an hour or two, say? We'll give it back to you in tip-top shape."

"Alright," I agreed. "But I'll take him back towards the evening. He's got a performance tomorrow."

"Thank you. That's most kind of you," the old woman bowed, hugging the cat and then they set off noisily towards the entrance.

...In the evening I went to fetch my artist on the fourth floor, at flat No. 20. I found my way there and rang the bell.

"Hello! Come for your artist? Just a second! Masha, I'm just off to the Stepanovs in the fourth block entrance. No, no, don't you worry. I'll get the cat right now. I gave him away in the afternoon. They absolutely begged me. Their son's in a young naturalists' group and wanted to look at the artist. And you know, the cat really is an artist! He spent a good four hours in the flat without leaving a single visiting card!"

We set off to their neighbour's.

The cat wasn't at the Stepanovs either. Smiling, they said: "The cat's marvellous and in great demand. Someone from the seventh block entrance came for him. They got rid of their own cat because they didn't want to dirty up their new flat. Well, they asked to borrow your little creature. He's so well-trained," the owner of this flat said admiringly.

Then we went to the seventh block entrance and then the twelfth where we found a note on one of the doors: "Gone on night-duty. Don't worry about the cat. Will return him to the house-manager's office tomorrow at 9.00."

Vasily Stepanovich, my new neighbour, assured me that I'd get Fluff back the next day.

"I'm to blame but it doesn't matter, you'll see!"

Early the next morning I really did see... First of all, the house-manager. He looked sternly at me from under his bushy

eye-brows and asked: "What's your full name? Where do you work?"

"In the animals' theatre," I said hesitantly because for some reason or other I was feeling embarrassed.

"I see, I see. If you let your theatre out again all over the house, we'll inform the militia."

"I don't know what you mean," I replied.

"But you will when you've seen the caretaker: Artemiev, give the lady back her property and show her your hands..."

The house-manager moved aside and the caretaker came forwards and put an enormous moving bag in front of me. After showing me his hands which were stripped with scratches and iodine, he said: "I got hurt carrying out my duties. Drove me mad! Do you think it was easy getting all these things into one bag? Here you are." He skilfully untied the string and something incredible happened: a live fountain of cats sprang out of the bag. There were dozens of them!

I staggered back.

"They aren't my cats! No, no, there's been some misunderstanding."

"Don't deny it. The tenants maintain you lent the cats to them yesterday. By the way, you can fetch the rest of them from the office. Artemiev, how many of them are left?"

"Seven."

I hadn't had time to reply because the door was flung open and beaming Vasily Stepanovich appeared in the doorway. My cat Fluff, looking fat because of titbits which it had been treated to everywhere it went, was sitting in his arms.

"The loaning session's over. Here's your artist for you. Oh, you've got a whole ensemble of cats here, I see..."

The effect of these words was disastrous.

"We'll fine you!" the house-manager roared.

"Huh, fancy organising theatres in a block of flats!" the caretaker seconded him.

The new tenants gathered round in a crowd on the landing.

"Stop distributing your cats at once!" the house-manager said and went off with the caretaker.

"Vasily Stepanovich, if you want a kitten, you can take your

pick because I've now got lots of spare ones," I said gloomily with a jeer to my neighbour. The latter, lowering his head guiltily, stepped towards the door.

The Pigeons' Good Fortune or the Cat Under Trial

A week after moving in I saw a long queue by the house-manager's office. A row of pet owners were waiting to be called into the mobile veterinary unit.

People were being called out of the queue by their flat number.

"Flat No. 11 — Cheremshansky, cat."

The injection had been made and the owner took the petrified cat into his arms.

"Flat No. 12 — Gai, spitz."

"Yes," I decided, "that cat's name sounds very melodious but a shorter one's better for a trainer. The name's important. Now, Gai is good and quick for the spitz."

While I was thinking, my turn came round.

"Flat fifteen — Durova, dog."

"What?" I asked in an offended tone.

"Yes, yes, excuse me. That's what's written here: Durova, cat and dog."

"But the animals have got names, you know," I objected.

"The mobile veterinary unit isn't interested in pets' names. They only slow down the work. The certificate is written out in the owner's name. Do you understand what I'm saying... Next! Flat seventeen — Meerson, alsatian, and Okhrimenko, setter."

Perhaps the other offended owners would also have lost their

tempers if shouts hadn't been heard from the yard: "Ye, got 'em... Now he really deserves to be killed!"

Some boys and girls soon ran into the house-manager's office, followed by a respectable-looking man holding a cringing striped cat by the scruff of its neck.

"Excuse me... Let me through..." he pushed forwards. The children followed him in a crowd.

"Here's the evidence!" the man uttered, squeamishly putting the cat on the table, and raising his hat, added in a tragic tone: "A stray!"

"Wait a minute, we'll write it down now," the inspector replied casually.

"Just look at it!" a woman whispered in fright, hiding a tiny shivering dog under her jacket.

"Yes, the cat's stained with blood. But tell me—was it done intentionally or by chance? That's the villain's third pigeon." The man weakly sunk onto a chair. "It's rabid. I demand you exterminate the cat at once and rid our new house of others like it."

At these words the queue noticeably thinned out.

"It's not part of our work," the inspector replied.

"Then, what should we do my good man? Don't forget the law! Nature preservation! And pigeons," the man's expression at once became tender, "are such wonderful birds! The dove is the symbol of peace!" he raised his voice and glared at the cat. "We must keep the pigeons happy."

"Give us the cat, we'll make him into an enemy for our war!" one of the boys ran excitedly towards the man.

"So, you won't help?" the man repeated, turning to the inspector.

"I've already given you a plain answer," the inspector drawled wearily. "We've come to the house to save you time but you won't let us go on with our work."

"Alright. Children, take the marauder. He deserves a slow, painful death."

Sleepy after a satiating dinner, the cat was turned over to the boys who with warlike whoops tried to run out of the office.

"No, wait, what are you doing?" I couldn't help exclaiming.

"You can see, can't you!" the man rapped out.

"Is your son here, too?" I barred the children's way.

"My grandson! Innokenty, come over here. How many times have I told you not to join in the war."

"But it was me who tracked down the cat, Granddad!" the boy began whining.

"Make this the last time! Tracked him down, indeed! And you, my dear lady, would do better not to interfere," he turned to me.

"Excuse me for saying so, but if your grandson is cruel to a cat today, he'll treat a dog badly tomorrow and break his grandfather's glasses the next day and, regarding himself as a hero, will carve his initials on all the trees in the yard. So, that's the sort of well-behaved child you're bringing up, is it?" a plump grey-haired woman chimed in.

"What, you, too?!"

"Yes, what of it?" she objected.

"How can you stick up for useless creatures like cats! A lot of good they do except for stinking out halls. Cats aren't sent into space, my dear. A cat, believe you me, isn't a dog! And then there're the pigeons — they're in danger!"

"Pigeons, I'd keep them in avaries as symbols but wouldn't let them out in the streets!" another voice joined in.

"Let's submit it to public opinion. Do you need evidence? Innokenty, fetch the six pigeon claws and feathers!" the man went on.

"Wait a minute, please, my wife can bring some evidence, too: for three days the poor thing's had a hard time cleaning her hat but without any success. We bought a new one the other day but it was again a waste of money because the pigeons dropped another present from the sky. You can't walk anywhere! And what about all bird droppings on the window-sills and cariatides' noses all along Petrovka Street? How do you like that?"

Hearing the unfamiliar word 'cariatides', the silent children, who were thoroughly enjoying themselves, at once became more lively and enthusiastically began listening. The children's delighted, curious faces and their restless agile arms which were now holding the captured cat gave me the idea of forming an animal theatre in the yard.

The Children's Theatre

Every theatre of course, has its own history and every history starts somewhere. This is also true of our Children's Theatre although it is relatively new. But when did it start in actual fact? Whatever the answer is, I disagree with the house-manager who is inclined to believe that it began with that unpleasant incident with the fine for the first rehearsal of the football match between the teams *Poodles-4* and *Mixed Mongrel Rangers*.

So, when did it start? We didn't dig any pits or use a crane to lay heavy foundation slabs and even if our theatre had had its own building it would certainly not have been embellished by four bronze horses but by a team consisting of a poodle, a bulldog, a fox terrier and two shaggy mongrels.

It all began when the puddles were drying out in the yard and the sparrows were chirping loudly as they fought over the first worm — in a word, on the day when the snub-nosed boys' boots were replaced by walking shoes, the ribbons in girls' plaits jumped in time with a skipping rope and the children started playing rowdy games, known by children of any yard in any town.

"Piff-Paff!" I said to my coarse-haired friend, a lively terrier, glancing cunningly at the children. "Would you like to show what you can do?"

"Urrr! Woof-woof!" There was a joyful, enthusiastic note in his reply. His tail shot up like a thumb and began wagging madly and then suddenly stopped in anticipation.

The plaits turned towards us and the skipping-rope fell on the pavement.

"No, don't drop the rope!" I said, "turn it for him. Please begin, Piff-Paff."

"One, two, three, four, five, six," the girls counted in unison and the boys, forgetting about the rag-ball in their hockey game, ran up to us in a crowd to watch agile Piff-Paff.

"And now Piff-Paff, be so kind as to do a waltz and then a jump!"

"That's instead of jumping on one leg," said the little girls.

They began counting in a chorus.

"One, two, three!"

"Hang on, children, let Piff-Paff say how many times he's jumped over the rope. Only do please speak loudly, Piff-Paff."

"Woof-woof, woof, woof, woof-woof!"

"And how many times were you too late to jump?"

"Woof!"

"Only once, then? Only once?" I looked reproachfully at Piff-Paff and turned to the children. "Would you believe it, what a cheat! Piff-Paff, be honest."

"Woof, woof-woof!"

"Oh, how well he counts!" exclaimed a little girl.

"He doesn't get bad marks in arithmetic like you do!" one of the boys at once retorted spitefully.

"But where did he learn to count? Does he know everything in arithmetic?" the children asked me, vying with each other.

I pretended I was thinking over their questions.

"Yes, I think he's mastered all the four laws. You can set him problems." And I at once ordered Piff-Paff: "After these exercises, my dear Piff-Paff, it wouldn't be a bad idea to do some mental work, too. Come on, who's going to set him a multiplication exercise?"

"Me!"

"No, me!"

"No, me! I like multiplication very much!" a plump little girl exclaimed.

"Well, Piff-Paff, now you and I are going to have a hard time!" I thought.

Examples were offered from every direction. I even became tired of multiplying, dividing and adding up in my head.

"Now have you seen for yourselves that Piff-Paff is an excellent mathematician?"

"Yes!" the children shouted together and the little girl who liked multiplication added: "I give him full marks!"

"Will you be angry, children, if I admit that I was joking?"

"May I tell them? I guessed at once. I've seen it done at Durov's Pet Corner!" a round-faced boy blurted out hurriedly.

"Then tell the others what you guessed," I suggested.

"It's very simple! Even my Burian now knows what two times two is. When he starts barking, if I want him to bark four times, I very gently snap my fingers after the fourth one and he stops barking. If it's two barks, I snap my fingers after two. That's all there is to it."

"Well done!" I praised him, shaking his hand.

He at once clicked his feet together: "Mikhail Agafin."

I was even confused by his extremely polite and refined manners and was about to introduce myself when a ginger-haired freckled boy interrupted me.

"Misha's very forward. He even goes to the girls' sewing club."

"That really is excellent," I stuck up for Mikhail Agafin. "So, Misha's almost unfathomed the secret of the dog's gift for arithmetic. I've only got to add a few things. Of course, a dog can't count..."

"They're stupid," said one of the girls, scornfully pursing her thin lower lip.

"You're wrong. A dog's brain isn't of course like yours and mine but you can't call him stupid."

"Piff-Paff's probably offended," one of the children remarked.

"I don't think so," I said. "Piff-Paff doesn't understand what we're talking about. He only knows a few words like: 'come here', 'sit', 'heel', 'walkies' and 'lie down'."

Hearing all these commands at once, poor Piff-Paff started darting about and looking anxiously at me as if asking me what he had done wrong.

"To make up for that, dogs have wonderfully developed hearing, sight and scent," I continued. "A dog is a highly sensitive animal. You see how I made Piff-Paff carry out any action at my command. Well, was that interesting?" I asked the children.

However, there was no need to ask this question. I could see that they had found everything I had said interesting, and so decided to get to the point.

"What about setting up a real animals' theatre right here in our yard?"

"Do you think we could?" the little girl who liked multiplication asked joyfully but hesitantly.

"Yes! Of course, in our theatre there won't be any tigers, lions or elephants but we've got lots of four-legged and feathered friends around us and we'll find some performers among them."

"But it's a pity we haven't got a tiger. A tiger would be just grand!" Carrot Tops said dreamily.

"We've got a poodle and Granny always has its coat cut like a lion's for the summer. The only trouble is, it's black and not at all tawny..." a little girl said shyly.

"So, that's settled. We'll meet at my place at six tomorrow and think things over properly," I said as I left the children. "It'll soon be the holidays, you know. I live in flat fifteen."

I went up to my flat, flung open the window and for a long time watched the crowd of children who had gathered round an enormous excavator. How enthusiastically they watched the yellow iron scoop at work in which a cubic metre of earth seemed as light as a feather! Nearby a horse harnessed to a cart was leisurely munching oats. The children only noticed it because it was standing on the road where heavy five-ton lorries were roaring past which were hundreds of times more powerful. I didn't mind at all that they were enthusiastic about something made of metal which imitated the power and strength of a living creature. It makes me happy that during space flights small children, teenagers and adults alike excitedly await the return of dogs which are not famed for their pedigree but for their service to science, grey and white mice, flies and the delicate leaves of plants. These are all forms of life sent to assert life itself throughout the universe.

But I get angry when these same teenagers don't notice these particles of life around them and when some have catapults for sparrows and others throw stones at cats or dogs which stray into their yard. Who will intercede and put an end to this cruelty which is as yet not intentional but the result of surplus energy? This is the theatre's goal! One should be formed in the yard of any house where there are children. Our house's animal theatre was to inspire love for animals and birds, and blades of grass.

How I Became the Director of the "Fake" Animal Theatre

"Oh, it's you! I'm very glad because you're just the person I'm looking for!" A stout woman, choking with anger and out of breath after climbing the stairs, was standing before me in the doorway. Her voice had an ominous ring.

"In so far as you are the director of this fake theatre of dogs, cats, rats, etcetera, I hope you'll take the responsibility for the damage?"

"Excuse me but..."

"No, I won't! Follow me!"

I threw on my coat and meekly followed the woman. After crossing the yard which now seemed interminably long, we went into one of the last entrances. We walked along in silence and went up in the lift in silence. The ominous silence came to an end as soon as we entered the flat. We were at once deafened by the loud howls of a boy and the hoarse barking of a dog.

The scene before me was breathtaking. A bulldog painted with black stripes like a tiger was barking at me because I was a stranger and continually trying to free his paws which were tied to the legs of a table. The shiny parquet floor and expensive-looking table-cloth were stained with black ink spots which were more like those of a jaguar than a tiger.

I already knew the boy. Although his freckles were less noticeable because of his blotchy eyes and swollen nose, but I could tell without a doubt that this was Carrot Tops.

"The thing's ruined," the woman pointed at the table-cloth, "and the dog's in a mess. The parquet will have to be scraped again! Leonid, tell me who taught you to do this?" The woman turned significantly towards me.

"I... myself..." Carrot Tops sobbed softly.

"Wait a minute, why did you..." I began.

"No, you're not going to get away with it!" the woman seethed again.

And then perhaps for the first time ever I felt like a lion tamer in a crowded circus. A great many people had crowded together. A lot of tenants were standing on the landing and on the steps of the staircase and the entrance door, banging loudly, heralded the arrival of more and more people. "To subdue anger, you have to divert the animal's attention," I remembered one of the first rules of training. The bulldog was wriggling just as much as before, the woman was no long shouting but screeching and Carrot Tops, who was responsible for all the trouble, was sobbing with fear.

To divert the woman's attention, I boldly went towards the bulldog.

"What are you doing, he bites!" she at once said anxiously.

"Just a minute, what's his name?" I asked.

"Thunder!" Carrot Tops' desperate voice rang out behind me.

"Thunder! Thunder!" I said sternly as I walked towards the dog, trying to step firmly and commandingly. The dog stopped, bared its teeth and started to move backwards as far as it could on its tether. I came up close and stretched out my hand.

"Please stop! It's bad enough as it is!"

"Wait. It's interesting to see what will happen," someone in the crowd said to the woman.

The bulldog no longer took much notice of my hands which were quickly untangling the rope and freeing its paws.

"Oh, blood! You've got blood on your hand."

"It's not blood, Mummy, it's ink!"

"I've had enough of you!"

"Don't worry, it really is ink," I put in. "But please tell me what you wanted to do with the dog." I said.

"I wanted to make him into a tiger and bring him to you at the circus trained and not just half-trained."

"I see, but what exactly did he have to do?"

"What all tigers do: jump through a burning hoop."

"Hear that! He might even have caused a fire in the house."

"I understand. You see, the boy doesn't know that the animal's

natural qualities are used when it is trained. His method of turning the bulldog into a tiger has got nothing to do with our theatre which hasn't been formed yet: we only thought about organising it in the yard."

Thereupon I, of course, briefly described what we'd be doing in the theatre so that another mother wouldn't become angry with us and talk about the theatre as being fake. Then I gave a lecture on training. I began telling them about my grandfather Durov. Did I remember him? No, of course, not. I was only three months old when he died and was called Natasha after his first daughter. I inherited his great love for work with animals.

I described grandfather Durov as I imagined him. An ordinary person, he became a magician with all the living creatures around him. He could make a film star out of an ordinary dog and opened his wonderful miniature animal railway which even now is famous among children. He proved that it was possible to subdue the predatory instinct and make wolves and goats, rats and cats, foxes and chickens live peacefully together.

After telling them all this I had to give a demonstration and the poor bulldog, the only four-legged creature for my impromptu performance, had to sit down by the correct method. I took hold of a biscuit and held it over the dog's head but not quite on level with his eyes. The bulldog wanted the biscuit and didn't want to let it out of his sight but, as it was uncomfortable for him to crane his neck, he had to sit down. When he had done so, I said, "Sit, Thunder, sit!", and gave him the tasty biscuit.

But once he had eaten the biscuit and the training session was over for the day, I had to go on telling the story. I was asked question after question. I talked about my childhood which I spent in the circus and recalled 1941.

We were in Smolensk and it was war-time but the circus people, just like everyone else, were at their posts. There was a nursery school near the circus which I often visited with my parrot. The children liked it when the parrot shouted: "good morning!", and announced: "Durov's at the circus today!" The parrot barked and maowed wonderfully and answered to a knock on the door: "Who's there?" These were virtually all the words he knew except

for a song which I will tell you about later. The town resounded with the loud thunder of explosions, and the horror of the first bombing raids and the people's tenseness made themselves felt. The parrot, like all the other circus animals, sensed the troubled atmosphere and forgot all his vocabulary from fear except for two words: sometimes he would crazily shriek out: "Who's there?" One day the parrot turned out to be a hero.

Not even we knew the parrot's life history. He was given to my father by some sailors. He didn't speak at all and spent hours ruffled up in his cage and only moved when he saw a cat. He didn't speak a word of Russian although he had been taught a lot. I once went into the circus yard with him when the elephant was taking a shower. My father shouted an order to the elephant: "Lily, komm zurück!" which meant: "Go back!" Following an old tradition trainers sometimes use German words in their work. Hearing them, the parrot suddenly shook his wings and began singing a jolly German song. At home as a joke my father said "hello" to the parrot in German and it again began singing the song. A year passed. After "remembering" the German song, the parrot, as it were, reacquired his gift of speech and quickly learnt Russian words and phrases, and stopped saying German ones. We soon stopped recalling this amusing incident and the horrors of war-time drove it out our memories. An order was issued to immediately evacuate the valuables and public institutions from Smolensk: the front was drawing nearer. The last performance was over and packing began in the wings. Suddenly a person appeared who demanded to see Durov at once. He was shown into a dressing-room.

"What a good thing I caught you!" he said. "I've been authorised to tell you that the order is no longer in effect. You're to stay here for the moment."

"You mean the circus has had permission to perform in army units on active service? At last!" rejoiced my father.

Just then a "lighter" (as we called the thermite bombs for brevity's sake) fell on the stables. My father rushed to the spot. The stranger was left alone in the dressing-room, looking suspiciously at a cheetah that had been excited by the bombing. When he returned, my father was faced with an incredible scene: the parrot was screeching a merry German song, the cheetah was baring its fangs at the

stranger while the latter, cowering between the dressing-table and the wall, was too terrified to move.

"Do you speak German?" asked my father casually as he chased away the cheetah.

"Alas, I don't speak anything but Russian, unless you count a little Ukrainian. However, we're getting off the subject. I'm here on behalf of the committee who's going to lead the artists' brigade that will be working at the front."

"Excellent. Then allow me to go and tell them to stop packing. You will forgive me if I leave you in this good company for a few minutes?" said my father, pointing at the cheetah and the parrot which was still singing at the top of its voice.

"All right, but not for long," said the stranger in annoyance.

And he did not have to wait for long, for a few minutes later two Red Army men were leading him out of the dressing-room.

This was probably the first time in legal history that a circus parrot had helped to expose an enemy saboteur. My father had realised at once that only the sound of German could set the parrot singing his German song.

Some of the animals accomplished real feats of valour. The people of Smolensk remember to this day the expression "Lily-Boom!". Lily was a twenty-nine-year-old elephant weighing nearly four tons. She worked day and night, clearing the debris on the streets by day and performing in the circus in the evenings. After an air-raid Lily would hurry with her trainer to the place where a demolition bomb had left a yawning crater or destroyed a whole building. Smolensk was used to her and no one was afraid of her: when she heard the command "Lily-Boom!", she turned into a living traction-engine and crane, pulling cars out of the craters and sorting the beams of the house that had been destroyed. How much love and gratitude she received at that time! When Lily was being led to the station with the rest of the circus cavalcade, the sternness on the faces of the townsmen softened into warmth and they saw her off like a soldier. By then she was limping, for she had been shot in the left leg and had it in a bandage.

In the train Lily felt better, but the bombing that broke out while we were at the station gave her a fit of nerves that made her behave badly for the only time in her life. There was no one in the

carriage, all the men were out loading cages on the platforms and the elephant, noticing a case of food opened the lid with ease and started to eat our food-supplies for the two weeks' journey, sharing them generously with her inseparable friends — the camel Bayadere and the dwarf donkey Pique. If it had not been for her leg-wound, received in battle, Lily would have had to answer for her actions: after she had been to work on it, there was only enough food for two days left.

I could go on forever recounting tales of the circus and its four-legged performers, but it was already too late. The bulldog Thunder snored so loudly that one waited involuntarily for the flash of lightning to go with it. And I interrupted my "short" speech. As it turned out, it was three hours long and earned us many admirers for our future theatre. And the next day I watched with triumph as Thunder was walking in the courtyard painted with Indian ink to make him into a tiger.

The Production Manager or Ivan the "Good Sport"

The theatre soon came into being. The first simple props had already been piled up in the house's store-room: rattles, dolls and a hammock net. The members of the handicraft club set about making things they hadn't yet been taught to. Small wooden bottles were made for the cat, a cat's house was built and letters were got ready for the canine mathematician. However, just as in any undertaking, there were some awkward obstacles which had to be removed just like splinters.

The obstacles were provided by two people who disapproved of the theatre. They were the house-manager and the yard-keeper.

The former remained prudently silent, leaving it up to the parents' committee to look after our theatre. The yard-keeper expressed his opinion aloud. Almost every rehearsal began with his stern advice: "What will you ever think up next! The building's been built with every amenity: there's a sand-pit and swings for the kiddies and then there's football and tennis or something else for the older ones— there's plenty for them to do as it is. But oh no, it's not enough." He sighed, went up to the cage containing five rats, counted them in silence and then continued. "If ever one of 'em's missing, I'll lodge a complaint. I wouldn't allow you to set the rats loose all over the house—they do nothing but harm and only create dirt."

However, every day his comments became kinder. He stopped more often by the rats' cage and sometimes made pleasant discoveries for himself.

"Look!" he would say with surprise. "They're such filthy little creatures but they keep themselves clean. That one's washing its fur with its tongue. You should follow its example," he turned to us. "It's important to want to be clean and tidy, but more important to make sure you really are. That's what they do."

Soon the yard-keeper lost forever his nickname "Spoil-Sport", which the children usually whispered behind his back. Coming to a rehearsal, he got three bags of seeds out of his pocket and said: "I confiscated these for the theatre's benefit. Let the seeds be put to some use: the rats can munch them—they've deserved them."

Since then he was respected by us all. He attended every single rehearsal and was personally responsible for erecting the light and the model globe. In the concert's final act a flock of pigeons was supposed to fly down into the light and land on the model globe. The effect of the finale was spectacular but the rehearsals were tedious and hard-going. The artists in the pigeons' act, in which all of them were soloists, kept changing. Because of the feed such a large number of pigeons gathered in the yard that there wasn't room for all of them on the globe which had been set up in the main flower-bed. The sparrows also made a nuisance of themselves. Scenting the feed, they tagged on after the pigeons like magnets and spoilt the whole effect. I got upset, the children became nervous but Ivan the yard-keeper comforted us by saying: "Why are you

looking so glum? You should look upon the sparrows as sort of amateur performers. It's a good thing they're interested. You should be pleased they've joined the theatre. You're getting them out of their bad habits. They used to peck the buds off the lilac bushes in spring but now they haven't got time to because of their rehearsals. So that means, your theatre's useful. See what I mean?"

One day Ivan brought some boys from a block of flats nearby to our rehearsal.

"Here's a delegation for you," he introduced the tough-looking boys. "Let them learn a bit of sense here. They can't think of anything better than playing war-games in their back-yard, you know," he said indignantly.

"But we don't play at war..."

"What do you play, then?"

"We play spy games."

"Why were you fighting, then?" Ivan asked.

"Nobody wanted to be the spy. Misha got picked but he called everyone pigs. First we thrashed him for calling us pigs and then for being a spy, as you're meant to. Then Misha started snivelling and went home to complain. Can someone like him really be a hero or an astronaut? Kolka here can but Misha can't because he's a sneak."

Then our day-dreamer freckled Carrot Tops, otherwise known as Lyonya Tyutkin, came forward.

"Let's make my bulldog into an air spy and show him in the theatre."

"We can't," said Misha pensively, "first of all, because an air spy's a pilot, and your bulldog doesn't know how to fly; secondly, your bulldog's already engaged as a football referee and a fireman."

"You never understand anything," Lyonya took offence and looked questioningly at me. "Couldn't we get hold of an eagle?"

"An eagle won't do," replied Misha Agafin. "It may be a bird of prey but you can't make it into a spy. An eagle is the symbol of freedom and power but a spy's just a villain!"

"You're right, Misha. Now if we had a pig, we'd most certainly make up an act about a spy."

They were the youngest trainers, I think, and they tried hardest at their first rehearsal. They had so few animals to work with and these animals were very ordinary but love and inspiration suddenly turned a cat into a magic performer and a guinea pig into a fabulous creature which really did exist. Ivan the yard-keeper and I smiled as we watched them and each of us, of course, thought about different things. I, too, had once galloped wildly after a nazi, resentfully feeling I was a rank-and-file soldier because the commander of the cavalry battalion was a nine-year-old boy. Childhood for me was already treasured memories but for them it was life in the present. As if answering my thoughts, Ivan said, shaking his head: "You know, don't laugh, I wasn't always an old man, you know. I used to play war games, too. It's not the same nowadays! The little scamps know things we couldn't even have dreamed of! They talk about spaceships as if they were ordinary trolleybuses."

Two days later another artist appeared in the small room by the lift. On the door Ivan had written a "No Admittance" note and below it the following sign: "Our animal theatre's auxiliary room."

How indescribably happy we were! We had a room and a real-live grunting piglet!

"It was sent to me by relatives as a tasty hors-d'oeuvre for the holiday. I'm giving it to you. You can do what you like with it, only remember that although the piglet may become an artist, there's nowhere to keep artists like him in a city and secondly, what's more important, the piglet will grow and you won't find anywhere to keep him in our block of flats. The house-manager has already made an exception for him but what to do later?"

But we weren't bothered by problems of this kind. We had a piglet and began rehearsing with it. The children brought it food and clothing. It squealled and jibbed as its costume was tried on.

Ivan was proud of his relatives' present. He laughed with us at the piglet, which didn't want to parachute down from the balcony, and was delighted when the parachutist landed safely. However, a sad expression crept into Ivan's kind eyes: the piglet was growing!

"Don't worry, Ivan, after our opening night we'll give the piglet to Durov's Pets Corner. Even his work now will go down on his work record and one day he'll retire gracefully." I consoled Ivan the "Good Sport" who was now our production manager.

Our First Spectator — Romka the Rocket

When our animal theatre came into being, all the young pioneers in our block of flats wanted to become trainers and forgot about their duty to look after the younger children. Groups of little boys and girls from two to seven years of age made raids on the flower-beds, built sand-castles on the drives, fought over spades and filled the yard with their angry and stubborn yells. All this (as the chairman of the parents' committee put it) was a daily reminder that "children of pre-school age required attention and supervision".

"Let's have a talk with them," Misha Agafin suggested.

"Just you try," mockingly replied Keta, our theatre's most skilful girl-trainer. "Nothing on earth's worse than my brother. Daddy tries to convince us that he'll improve as he gets older but Romka's already six and he hasn't changed a bit."

"Why don't I give the children a lecture on..." Lyonya Tyutkin tossed his wild mane of hair and fell silent as he couldn't think of a suitable subject.

"That's right, that's right. Tell them about life on Mars," Keta began laughing, "but they'll ask you what life means and then what Mars means. And my little brother will answer for you: Mars was the Alsatian we had at our country house."

"You'll get it if you don't watch out!" Lyonya took offence. "I want to help you!.."

"You're not the only one who wants to help! I do, too! But how can I if Mum's dumped Romka on me and he tails after me everywhere?" Keta shook her head sadly and added: "I have a hard time getting away from him."

"A hard time," Misha Agafin drawled. "You fly to the rehearsals like a rocket."

"Stop teasing!" Keta said angrily.

"Yes, we'll have to have a good think," I interrupted them.

However, we didn't have to think for long. Towards evening there was an abrupt and a very gentle ring on my door bell. The dog lying by the door alertly pricked up its ears. Shortly afterwards I heard a stick scraping against the wall and then another gentle ring. I opened the door. A boy aged about four or five with a large ruler, with which he had evidently pressed on the bell, was standing in the doorway.

"Have you come for some paper?" I asked, remembering the children's recent campaigns to collect scrap paper.

"No, I'm here on a visit!"

"What do you mean?" I asked in surprise.

"This is Durova's flat. I'm Romka. Keta comes to train here. She won't take me with her. I'm the Rocket, you know. That's what Daddy calls me. I've come by myself, you see," the boy sighed and calmly walked in without saying anything else.

"So, you're Romka the Rocket? I'm pleased to meet you. Do you want to become a trainer?" I asked the question I had got used to asking every young tenant in our block of flats.

"Nope. I'd rather become a vacuum-cleaner."

"A what?!" I was taken aback.

"Yes. It makes a lot of noise and plays with dirt but nobody tells it off—except when it breaks down, of course."

"Now I see. I'm sorry I can't do anything to help you."

"Please let me see your show. I've come to see it."

"So, you're a spectator, are you?"

"No, I'm Romka. Keta's my sister but I'm even smaller than her."

"But if you want to watch the show, it means you're a spectator," I said this more for my own benefit because I now realised how Lyonya could help. Carrot Tops would spend a lot of time on the little spectator. A plan came into my head at once but here was the tiny spectator asking to be allowed to watch the show.

"Let's go, Romka, the animal theatre's in the yard, you know."

We went out of the front door and he saw the familiar yard which

hadn't changed in the slightest. Glancing suspiciously at me, Romka immediately asked: "Where's the theatre, then?"

"Here," I replied and tapped the sand with my foot with complete confidence.

"I can't see it."

"You see those pigeons — they're performers."

"And do they have costumes to keep themselves warm?"

"I don't think they need them."

"Granny says the grey ones don't catch cold because a rainbow's left a scarf on their necks forever."

"And you try to remember what your granny tells you. Good boy!"

Then I showed Romka our cat which would fly in the rocket with the mice but he suddenly wanted to see the rocket: there was nothing special about a cat, but a rocket...

"May I fly with them in the rocket?" Romka asked.

He grabbed the imaginary wheel with his hands and, pretending he was an astronaut, began shouting loudly: "Beep-beep, mind out!"

"Who are you giving an order to?" I asked.

"Here's the hooter. You can hoot in the sky, you know, because there're no people in it and you have to make sure another rocket doesn't crash into you. Beep-beep!"

And Romka ran or, as he imagined, flew around the yard, taking no notice of the cat which plunged into the doorway in fright.

From that day onwards Lyonya Tyutkin organised a team which called itself "H. T. W. Y. S." Of course, I couldn't decipher this high-sounding name at once but the team worked efficiently. They first organised games and then learnt songs but learning how to dance proved harder. The children aged between two and four couldn't remember the steps and preferred frightening each other by moving about on all-fours and growling. Only the Rocket would have nothing to do with Lyonya. He sat for hours by the drain-pipe and, banging on the pipe with his ruler, reminded his sister that he was lonely and miserable on his own. Keta got angry but controlled her temper and glancing out of the corner of her eye at the window, kept an eye on her brother.

He did, however, manage to penetrate into our theatre's wings and it was I who helped him. I wasn't firm enough with him and gave

in, I admit. Romka the Rocket became my assistant. True, his ruler really did the work and became indispensable for the guinea-pigs.

Romka was accepted cautiously. I had to think of a valid cause and told the children about my talk with Romka.

Romka asked me if I had a daughter. I replied that I hadn't.

"Have you a son?"

"No, I haven't a son either."

"Have you got any children at all?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then take me with you to the theatre today. When children are alone, they're taken with their parents to work. I used to go with my mum and now I'll go with you. So, that's settled."

His last phrase proved that his decision was irrevocable.

Romka was now working with us although Lyonya Tyutkin, the leader of "H. T. W. Y. S.", kept reproaching me for being weak-willed and undermining his authority. Well, he was right because the "H. T. W. Y. S." really was helping the theatre by working with the young spectators.

On the Eve of the Opening Night

The theatre whose roof was the sky and floor the earth, opened at the end of June. There were no tickets and, consequently no gate-crashers. To attract an audience we resorted to "live" advertising. In the morning when lots of people began hurrying to work across all the yards, we split up into three groups. Keta and her little brother, Romka, headed the first one. As an advert they used Red Comb the rooster which was

to crow loudly to passers-by and draw their attention to the poster:

ATTENTION! OUR ANIMAL THEATRE WILL OPEN TOMORROW

The rooster crowed twice and played on a harp and then grew tired and began breathing quickly which alarmed Romka. As he was bored, Romka asked for a drink but Keta couldn't leave her post, so he threatened to start crowing like the rooster himself and at once started cackling. Tired of being a rooster, Romka began whining: "I want a drink, give me a drink!"

He whined pitifully and for an unbearably long time and they now caught the attention of every passer-by.

"Why are you being unkind to the little boy?" compassionate people asked Keta.

But Romka, feeling their sympathy wailed: "I want a drink!"

A window banged on the ground floor nearby and a voice grumbled loudly: "It's a disgrace. The children don't know how to behave and there's been no peace and quiet since early morning!"

Romka stopped whining but the rooster shook its feathers, crowed three times and its sonorous echo reverberated across the yard.

"Oh, you're at it again, are you? Just you wait!"

The window banged again above Keta's head and a second later an enraged woman rushed into the yard. With the rooster under her arm and Romka in tow, Keta rushed into her yard.

The second group did not return as quickly. Misha Agafin was lucky. Our trained piglet turned out to be an extremely successful advert. He danced a waltz, turned the poster over with his snout and pounded on a drum.

The third group still hadn't returned and we began to worry. It was already long after noon but Lyonya Tyutkin still hadn't shown up. Misha set out to scout round the nearby yards. He soon returned carrying a few crow's feathers and a tattered poster on which only the word "Attention!" had remained intact. Lyonya had been sent to advertise the theatre with the bulldog and crow. The crow was to give out programmes and the bulldog was to an-

nounce the time of the show by barking. However, there was no sign of either Lyonya or his assistants.

"What's happened to him?" I wondered anxiously.

"There you are! Just try opening a theatre with Lyonya's help!" Keta said angrily.

"Perhaps it isn't his fault. Perhaps something's happened to him!" said Misha.

We all set off in search of him.

"Have you seen a ginger-haired boy with a bulldog?"

"No," we were told in one yard.

No one had seen him in the first and second yards and it was only in the third we were told that a ginger-haired boy had run through the yard without stopping but he didn't have a bulldog with him.

What had happened?

We didn't have to guess for long because an unknown mongrel pursued by Thunder and Carrot Tops raced round the corner. As he ran he shouted out: "Stop him!"

Letting the mongrel slip past, we scattered in different directions across the bulldog's path.

"Pheew!" Lyonya gasped for breath.

"Well?"

"What happened?"

"Where were you?" he was at once swamped with questions.

"Pheew!" he sighed and, shaking his fist at the bulldog, grumbled: "You get nothing but trouble with this Thunder! Everything went fine at first. The crow started it. Though its wings were clipped, it somehow managed to fly away and I tried to catch it! Thunder rushed after me and the passers-by thought he was attacking me. They rushed at him and he ran away from them. I chased after him for three blocks! I'd have caught him before because he was running quite slowly but then he spotted another dog and that's what started it... He started running so fast! It was a good thing the dog turned in our direction or else..." Without paying any attention to guilty Thunder, Lyonya sat down on the asphalt and the crow immediately jumped out from inside his shirt.

"What have you sat down for! We've got so much work left to do and we've only got one day left," Keta said in a commanding tone.

Of course, when our first performance, or in theatrical terms, première, began, I felt very nervous: you see, the audience was very well acquainted with the acts and the performers because the rehearsals had gone on before everyone's eyes. But judging by the way they knew and vied with each other in describing each act and watched the show, I realised that we had won over their hearts. I'm not going to describe that day now. It was a great and happy occasion for us.

We enthusiastically presented our show to the young audience and realised that it gave them joy and pleasure. Here is our poster:

OUR ANIMAL THEATRE'S PREMIERE

We begin our performance for you,
children and grown-ups

The dogs will become jumpers and mathematicians and help to put out the fire in the cat's house inhabited by mice
An intelligent crow who isn't at all stupid
Rats and a cat as parachuists
Guinea pigs as super-duper ground performers
The spying pig's flight in the air won't have dangerous consequences
Performing pigeons
A globe and the dove of peace

* * * * * *

A t t e n t i o n ! A match will take place in the interval for football fans between the teams Poodles-4 and Mixed Mongrel Rangers
Bulldog will referee

* * * * * *

Bring your own chairs, stools and camp-beds.
The latter are very convenient for accommodating spectators aged between three and five
Lighting – the sun
Music – whatever is offered by the spectators
Theatre's address: our back-yard

I'd like to explain a few things: the poster's text was written by our budding poet, trainer and instructor, Lyonya Tyutkin. You shouldn't be surprised that there is a "t" missing in the word "parachutists". It doesn't matter because children who are getting their second teeth, pronounce the word as it was written on his poster.

And what's more, friends, when my young colleagues became tired, I had to entertain them with stories. I hope they'll entertain you, too. Here they are:

Travelling Animals

Kitty

To my mother

"Will the train with Durov's animals be arriving soon?" I asked a railway official.

It was delayed again! I walked along the platform. It had been drizzling since the morning. Hoots, whistles and people's voices rang out around me but I walked along thinking about Kitty...

Kitty was given to me by some hunters in Magnitogorsk. They brought her in a huge cage they had made themselves and, to show me my present, spent a long time poking the animal with sticks to make her stand up. "We'd like to give this wild cat to you," said the hunters, showing me their present.

Growling and huddled frightenedly against the bars, a pitiful, thin creature, which looked almost like a domestic cat, looked at me from the cage.

Animals of this kind had never been seen in the vicinity of Magnitnaya mountain and the hunters told me that a family of wild cats had migrated to them from Sverdlovsk with a train load of timber in the winter. They had tracked down two and this one had wandered onto a construction site, obviously hungry, and that was how it was captured.

This was hard to believe but I was delighted with my present and readily accepted it. I called for my assistant and he put on some coarse gloves and began dragging the animal out of its cage. It huddled even closer to the bars, growled viciously and suddenly pounced on the gloves that were moving towards it.

We did, however, manage to drag it out of the cage, although

putting a collar on it proved more difficult. For this purpose a two-metre stick with a noose at one end was fetched. The noose was thrown over the animal's head, pulled and made into a collar, and no matter how hard it struggled, it couldn't get at the person because of the stick.

Then it began to jump, and baring its teeth and shuddering convulsively, it suddenly became quieter and flopped lifelessly onto the cement floor.

I instinctively rushed towards the animal, and seizing it in my arms, shouted: "Fetch some water quick!" I continued holding it until I felt that it was regaining consciousness.

The cage was brought to me and I quickly put the dangerous animal into it.

When the cage was carried off, I looked round and caught sight of my anxious-looking mother.

"Do you want to train it?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"But nobody's ever worked with lynxes."

"I wouldn't say it's a lynx..."

"Yes, it's a lynx. Look — the tufts on its ears are only just beginning to appear but her side-whiskers are very noticeable. It's a lynx and it's not more than eight months old. You must have a good think first! This kitty's very frightening."

But I spent days on end by the lynx's cage. I had some sticks with sharp ends made, stuck meat on them and gave them to it. For the first few days it didn't take the meat and growled gently when she saw the stick. But hunger eventually forced it to come closer. Soon Kitty realised that I wasn't going to poke it with these sticks and confidently came up when it heard me calling: "Kitty! Kitty!"

The lynx let me stroke and scratch its lovely, strikingly-marked muzzle through the bars of the cage. When I came up to it too boldly, the tiny tufts on its ears began to quiver and the black tassel on its tail whisked angrily from side to side.

It was soon time to begin rehearsing. The cage was taken into the ring and the door was opened.

I took hold of a chunk of meat and softly called: "Kitty! Come here!"

It looked out of its cage, glanced round and cautiously came towards me, treading soundlessly. It ate the meat. I wanted to stroke her but it growled with displeasure. I stubbornly stretched out my hand to it. With an accurate, light blow Kitty knocked my hand aside. Then I grabbed its muzzle with one hand and its paw with the other and pressed hard on them. I held them until I felt its tensed muscles begin to relax and its fiery, frightened green eyes, which were darting about, grow still, waiting to see what would happen next.

I let go of it and tenderly said: "Here, Kitty," and handed it a large chunk of meat.

Kitty reached towards it and then suddenly dashed to the left and in two bounds landed in her cage.

Day after day I fed it in the ring, taught it to walk on a leash, sit with me quietly on the barrier and on the sawdust and lie down beside me on the rug. All my work hasn't been in vain.

Soon Kitty got so used to me that it followed me about like a dog. Then we started to have real rehearsals. Kitty had to become professionally skilled: it had to learn to do a pirouette and jump from one tub to the next, which for the time being were two metres apart, sit on its hind-legs, roll on an enormous ball and above all, walk on a leash along the barrier right next to the audience.

In six months Kitty became a real artist but on the eve of its opening night it suddenly fell ill. I had to do everything the vets prescribed. It had to be watched over and I decided to take her to my hotel.

I brought Kitty to my room, laid it on a soft bed, locked the door and went off to the circus. However, while I was there, the cleaning-woman wanted to tidy my room. She opened the door and gasped with fright. A huge lynx, bored and lonely in this strange environment, was coming towards her, growling ferociously.

We were, of course, asked to leave the hotel and my mother had a lot of trouble trying to persuade the manager to take us back, promising that nothing of the kind would happen again.

My mother always had to face the consequences from her rowdy family of trainers. She tried not to come to my rehearsals. Although she was very brave, she still had her maternal feelings. She was afraid that at a dangerous moment she wouldn't be able to stop

herself shrieking and thereby distract my attention from the animal. At such a moment the animal which had lost touch with the trainer might do him so much harm. That's why she didn't want to be present at my rehearsals. On the opening night she stood behind the curtain, feeling nervous for me. And as I came out into the coloured spotlights, I realised she hated Kitty who was taking up all my time and on whom my life now depended. However, I knew that at this moment when it was the opening night for both of us, mother was just as anxious about Kitty as she was about me.

Blinded by the spotlights we couldn't see the spectators but we sensed them, heard their buzz of surprised voices spreading across the rows. When Kitty jumped off the barrier, the light was turned full on. Kitty had never seen my long dress with its long, rustling skirt. It wanted to touch it with her paw and as she was playing with the skirt, she caught my leg with her claws and I felt a sharp pain but the act went on. Kitty did a pirouette, sat down on a small table and then took a chunk of meat from my hands and standing up on its hind legs, grasped my shoulders with its front paws.

"Well done, Kitty! Well done!"

The lynx performed her tricks accurately, jumping off the table and doing another pirouette.

The act came to an end. Kitty condescendingly acknowledged the applause. She was used to it because at rehearsals I asked anyone who happened to be present to applaud. Flowers flew into the ring. Kitty had never seen flowers before. She instinctively stepped back and dragged me behind the curtain by the chain I was holding onto tightly. I then lost consciousness and fell to the floor. Nobody could come near me because the lynx was by my side and they didn't dare chase it away with water from a fire-hose fearing she might attack me. When I came to, I saw Kitty was lying beside me, licking my hand as if nothing had happened.

So much for our opening night, after which I was put in hospital and Kitty, who had quite innocently decided to play with my dress it hadn't seen before and had accidentally wounded my leg, sat gloomily in its cage.

A couple of days later when I felt better, some of the circus management staff came to ask me what should be done with the lynx. They didn't know whether to send it to a zoo or present its

fur to a museum of regional studies. It was dangerous to keep an animal which had drawn its trainer's blood.

I looked at my visitors in amazement. Did they really not understand that Kitty had taken up a year of my life and was my cherished work which I couldn't possibly part with? I said nothing in reply but they saw that I couldn't do that.

They returned to the circus from the hospital and continued discussing what should be done with Kitty. My mother was among the people standing by the cage. She took a stick with a few chunks of meat attached to the sharp end and began feeding Kitty.

The hungry animal growled loudly and didn't want to get up.

"Don't be silly, Kitty!" my mother said. "Come here! You mustn't go hungry or I'll get into trouble with your mistress."

By saying this, without knowing it, my mother had very clearly answered the question which the circus management had put to me. Kitty was saved and, along with the other animals, was sent to Leningrad, where after I recovered, I was to perform with it again.

But it so happened that I didn't see the brightly floodlit ring any more. An irreparable tragedy suddenly befell me: my mother died. I realised I wouldn't go back to the circus for some time. There's an old unwritten law of the circus ring: if a trainer experiences deep sorrow or great happiness and he cannot hide his feelings from his animals, he is not allowed to go out into the ring.

I came to say good-bye to Kitty. I let it out of its cage and it joyfully purred and began rubbing itself against my legs. I looked at it but couldn't see it. I felt terribly sad. I wanted to hear my mother's affectionate voice again: "Have you already finished rehearsing? The show'll soon begin!"

But my mother wasn't there. I only felt deep, irreparable grief which for the first time caused me suddenly to lose my self-control, and hugging Kitty, I burst out crying. Kitty could have attacked me but it seemed to understand everything. I felt its rough tongue licking my wet cheeks and heard it purring softly and I felt as, gently rubbing against me, it was extending and withdrawing its sharp claws.

Then, as if reading my thoughts and seeing my helplessness, Kitty carefully freed its head from my arms, went away into its cage and stared at me for a long time.

It most likely behaved strangely because it was bewildered. You see, it had never seen me so defenceless before. However, I only realised this as I was now standing at the station waiting for the train on which Kitty had gone on tour and performed without me.

More and more people were appearing on the station's platform.

The train with our animals must have arrived. Yes, it had! I went up to the cages and saw a large indifferent-looking lynx which no longer recognised me.

"Kitty, Kitty," I said quietly and looked at her intently. She was standing still.

"Kitty!"

It moved and then stopped again as if listening attentively.

"Kitty!" I shouted to it, clinging to the bars of its cage, and it walked in the direction of my voice, growling deeply...

It came up, slowly shiffed my coat and walked back.

"Kitty!"

I wanted to call it again but there was no point: Kitty only vaguely remembered my voice. Well, that's how it should be. After all, it had a new trainer now.

Champ

It was all my fault. The cat dashed about by the ditch, ran up to the water's edge, dipped her paws in lightly, shook them feverishly and straining herself, mewed plaintively. Nearby two fluffy kittens huddled frightenedly together. But the cat seemed to have forgotten about them. She didn't take her eyes off the gutter where, snorting and moving its paws quickly, a small racoon was swimming.

I understood why the cat was anxious. It was quite natural maternal concern. It all began when the cat's family was suddenly enlarged and an adopted son in the form of a small racoon appeared.

From then on the mother cat had no peace. When the cat took all her family out for a walk in the yard, Champ gladly went along, too, but here the cat was always in for some incredible surprises.

Champ walked as usual behind the kittens which strode boldly and decorously along, gallantly twitching the ends of the tails. Champ, however, didn't walk but waddled and bobbed from side to side.

And no matter how hard the cat tried to keep her children looking "spick and span", Champ spoilt the whole picture. His thick dark-brown fur was tousled and although the cat licked it with her rough tongue, it did no good: her adopted son looked as slovenly as before. Champ's fur became sleek and glossy when he attempted to hunt.

But the mother cat then became very displeased with him. She taught her children to be courageous and bold but Champ was simply nosy. Sometimes when he spotted an interesting-looking beetle, he would stop, sit down quietly on his hind legs and tightly hold the insect in his front paws as if they were hands until the cat, confused and amazed by her son's inexplicable behaviour, slapped him with her paw and Champ, stooping, began walking reluctantly along on all fours.

When the kittens were out hunting, they could already spring off their hind paws and jump, their bodies beautifully poised in flight, but the mother cat was still having great trouble with Champ. He was a fine hunter but he didn't jump very lightly and for some reason sprang on all four paws at once.

Then, when the kittens, proud with their success, growled and purred as they ate their catch, Champ again sat down on his hind legs and with his fore-ones neatly dealt with a sparrow. He did this quickly, champing joyfully and that's how he got his name—Champ.

Champ couldn't mew and the cat was probably annoyed that her son didn't so much take after her as their greatest enemy—Zhuk—a horrible mongrel.

That's why, when Champ growled at the frolicsome kittens, and, what's more, growled just like Zhuk, the cat arched its back instinctively, and bristling and angry, she slowly advanced on Champ from the side.

At the most crucial moment affectionate Champ rushed towards her. He perhaps thought that his mother was just on time to help him. Then the cat at once felt confused and most likely for this reason she devoted all her time and attention to Champ and forgot about her kittens.

However, Champ was incredibly greedy and grew hourly, by leaps and bounds. When they were five months old the kittens were still fluffy balls, but he was already bigger than his foster mother.

The cat wasn't bothered by this and was delighted with Champ.

"Well, Champ," I thought, "we'll soon be able to start training with you. You'll become a real performer. You'll be our laundress."

Teaching Champ to wash was easy. You see, even outside captivity wild racoons always wash their food before eating it. That was one of the racoon's characteristic features and something which trainers skilfully used in their work. Champ was first to wash some little pieces of meat, which I'd throw to him, in a bowl. Then I'd wrap a chunk of meat in a handkerchief and throw it into the bowl. Champ, scenting the meat, would immediately unwrap the handkerchief, but as he did so, he would, as before, rinse the handkerchief with the chunk of meat. And so, when he had got used to taking the meat out of the handkerchief, I would outwit him by throwing an empty handkerchief into the bowl. Champ wouldn't notice this and would quickly rinse the handkerchief and would then be given the meat from my hands. In this way he would become a laundress.

I already imagined the large platform on which the laundry would be put. Champ would come out of a little house, leaf through his accounts book and then lift the sign marked "Laundry Open" in a business-like way. While I was thinking about this, the cat's family came near the shallow gutter. The kittens played mischievously with Champ while the mother cat looked on. The kittens then

chased Champ right up to the edge of the gutter and he suddenly lost his playful mood. Then, carefully rubbing the moist sandy earth, he began moving his fore-paws, found a small beetle, went on rubbing for a short while and then putting his paws into the water began instinctively waving them in the way I wanted him to in our training sessions. If only I had a piece of meat, I could have tried to begin Champ's very first rehearsal!

I looked in my pockets and found nothing but a small sugar lump. I wanted so much to test Champ that I forgot about the mother cat and offered the sugar to the young racoon. He took it in his paws, sniffed it, dipped his paws into the water and began rubbing them.

"Well done, Champ! Well done! Go on, wash it!"

However, as Champ was "washing" the sugar, it became smaller and smaller. I felt happy. You see, within six months another good artist would be in the circus ring.

The racoon's paws worked fast under the water. Then he took them out: they were empty and sticky. Of course, the sugar had dissolved! Not understanding what had happened, Champ suddenly rushed forwards. There was a splash and he landed in the gutter!

The poor cat! She was a good, kind mother and, perhaps, if I hadn't dragged Champ out of the water, she would have jumped into the gutter to save him. Seeing Champ back on the ground, the cat began licking his wet fur. Having calmed down slightly, she hurriedly took all her family away from the gutter.

They walked along, the kittens strutting proudly in front, followed by Champ, bobbing lazily up and down, and last of all very slowly by the cat. The poor cat's sides were sunken and her tread weary and I felt guilty as I looked at her with admiration.

But what could I do about it! Although Champ was now a cat's son, he still had to become a laundress.

Matryona and Lyulka

It was Lyulka's restless, highly-strung temperament that brought her to the circus. A bo's'n brought the tiny monkey on a steamer to Vladivostok as a present for his son. The boy was absolutely thrilled. Lyulka really was very funny in her clown's hat with a tassel and costume which had been carefully made out from different-coloured ships' flags by the bo's'n.

However, very soon things started going wrong in the bo's'n's house. First of all the dressing-table was toppled over and the perfumes spilt, and by the evening there were traces of Lyulka's pranks on everything in the flat.

We received the following phone call in our hotel: "We've got a monkey here... A very nice one but... Please take her for the circus." That's how Lyulka came to the circus. She immediately had to get used to a cage and the other monkeys around her.

There were five monkeys sitting in the cage and they all looked different. Only an old monkey by the name of Matryona, who was already a famous artist, was like Lyulka. She had the same canine head and tail as Lyulka, only she was phlegmatic. Perhaps that was why Matryona bore herself like a queen. She could stare for hours at the bedraggled parrot Makar without taking the slightest notice of his babbling. When she became bored, she picked her hairy chest with her fingers with an air of concentration, pretending to search for something. And when she grew tired, Matryona would let out a sad, long wail. Lyulka would be the first to answer her and then a racket broke out in the monkeys' cage. Obviously satisfied by the attention she was getting Matryona would then scratch herself and lie down to sleep.

She only behaved differently on Sundays. However, this wasn't her fault and could be easily explained. Matryona's trainer made her play the part of an intelligent and well-mannered monkey. She had to leaf through the pages of a large book where, without the spectator noticing, she found titbits. Then, like in a restaurant, she was served with a bowl of soup which she daintily sipped with a spoon. But as she had to work in four performances in a row on Sundays, by the end she was very fed up and spent a long time fussing about in her cage, keeping her neighbours awake. Lyulka became especially agitated on these occasions. When anyone tried to come up to Matryona's cage, she would grab the bars and angrily shake them, and Matryona, wrapped up in a warm rag, would snort blissfully.

When the cage was being cleaned once, Lyulka was let out and tied to the door. The lead was long and Lyulka was next to Matryona's cage in a trice. For a few seconds they looked attentively at each other, frowning in surprise but once they had become acquainted, the monkeys refused to be parted. Lyulka, who was trained to become an artist, was taken to rehearse alone in the mornings. She was very irritable and threw a tantrum at the slightest provocation. Sometimes you only had to show her a tiny, thin twig and she immediately threw herself onto the sawdust and deafened the ring with heart-rending wails. But if her trainer (heaven forbid!) didn't watch out, she would manage on the sly to bite him spitefully. However, this didn't stop her from being a very talented artist. Two months later Lyulka was already taking part in the races, sitting gracefully astride a pony.

One evening Lyulka was suddenly taken from the cage instead of Matryona and the latter sat quietly by the bars waiting for her friend. However, a few minutes later she began dashing round the cage, screeching, chucking out her food and tearing her rag. We soon realised why she was so excited: it was the music coming from the ring to which Matryona had been performing her act for over two decades. Then the music stopped, the cage door was flung open and tired Lyulka was carried in.

From that day onwards Lyulka completely took over Matryona's part and the old artist only appeared in the ring at premières or very special performances.

How the Hare Saved the Guinea Pigs

He was a most ordinary hare. In the summer his fur turned yellow, as it was meant to, and in the winter it became white and the black stripes on his ears became very distinctive.

The hare once performed on tour in a seaside town. It was autumn and the hare's fur was about to change colour but for some reason it remained yellow, as in summer. This is said to happen to hares when the sea is nearby. I don't think this left any imprint on his character. The hare was, as before, timid and afraid of all new objects, and if annoyed by something, he would angrily pound a drum roll for a long time. Among the animals in the circus he was the drummer. This wasn't hard work for the hare: he had been used to pounding his paws in the wood from a very early age whenever he was irritated by something trivial. Here in the circus, however, he had to pound his paws not only when he was angry but when his trainer ordered him to. Well, he would do this, too, if he was given some tasty sweet-smelling parsley. Catching sight of it, the hare, unaware of the audience, would cheerfully pound his paws to the orchestra's accompaniment.

And so the hare continued being a quite unremarkable artist in the circus. He didn't even have his own cage but lived with a whole family of guinea pigs which were always cheerful and noisy. They didn't get in each other's way: the hare paid no attention to his neighbours and the nimble guinea pigs probably admired him for being so big and floppy-eared and for being able to jump to the top of the cage. They looked upon him as their leader. The guinea pigs

only became silent with fear when they saw the hare practising his musical act loudly and clearly on the back of one of their family.

They were taken to performances together. Sometimes, however, the hare and the guinea pigs had to perform to children in places which couldn't be reached by train or boat, and so they flew by plane. Then, of course, the small artists — the hare, foxes, cockerels and martens — became the stars. You see, you can't take elephants up in a plane, can you!

And so one day the hare flew with the guinea pigs in a plane. It was a difficult flight. No wonder the guinea pigs became silent as if they were asleep and the hare began breathing heavier and heavier! When the plane landed, the cages were at once unloaded and put onto a luggage truck. When the truck was fully loaded, the cages were taken to a vehicle but the hare's cage was accidentally dumped and buried among some bales. Panting the hare scrabbled to the bars and inhaled the sharp frosty air. Even the guinea pigs came to life and began scurrying about.

At first tiny cold drops of moisture trickled through the bars and then some light snow evenly powdered all the corners of the cage. The guinea pigs stopped moving, huddled together and began sqeaking plaintively. The hare stretched out and lay completely still.

Soon the sky was ablaze with stars. The hare remained still but no matter how closely the guinea pigs huddled together, they couldn't get warm.

Suddenly a small ginger guinea pig huddled against the hare's side and the others followed suit. They lifted him higher and higher until he was lying on a carpet of guinea pigs. Then he made himself more comfortable and stretched out almost right across the cage.

The next morning when they found the mislaid cage and cleared the snow under the bars, they saw that the hare was lying there motionlessly and the guinea pigs were tucked cosily under him like chicks under a brood-hen.

That was how the hare saved all the guinea pigs' lives.

And although at the performances the hare beat out a polka on a drum for the audience as he always had done, he was now a hero and it became clear that even a quite ordinary hare was capable of doing something heroic.

The Governor

When the animals were once travelling to another town a lama, which was new to the circus, was put in the same carriage as the pelicans. There was no room for the poor fellow with the ponies and so during all the journey Petka (as he was called) had to get used to the way of life of his strange pelican neighbours. He found this rather hard. It was summer. The ordinary goods van was stuffy and Petka had an unpleasant time in his fluffy fur coat. In the morning he was awaken by flies. Tired and bad-tempered, he would get up and, staring dully at something, he would stand quietly, ignored by his neighbours.

However, when a bucket of water containing some fish, which had been washed for the pelicans, was brought, Petka started and joyfully stretched towards the bucket. Filled with indignation and fear, the pelicans shook their greyish-white wings and, puffing out the pouches under their huge beaks, rushed at Petka. Sometimes he got into serious trouble but the tiff usually ended happily. The pelicans overturned the bucket of water and began bathing, ruffling and shaking their feathers and then splashed water all over Petka, who made the best of it. He bent his head and at first took the unexpected shower and then bathed and happily wallowed in the dirty puddle flowing out of the pelicans' cage.

After his bath Petka proudly raised his head and looked at his pelican neighbours. They were large birds with very long beaks. When they were thrown fish, the pouch under their beaks would puff out in a trice. The cunning, greedy birds were most likely showing with these pouches that they could eat a fish almost the same size as themselves. And this was certainly true. Petka was at first frightened of the pelicans but then he even began to get angry with them. He would stamp his hooves and flatten back his ears. Although Petka was exceedingly fierce, with his ears

flattened back, he still looked like a meek good-natured sheep.

Generally speaking, Petka was like several animals: his strong, slender legs and knotty knees were like those of a camel and his ever-watchful ears were more beautiful and delicate than a donkey's. To make up for that, his tail couldn't be compared to anything, except, perhaps, a fibre paint brush.

However, the pelicans quite clearly paid no attention whatsoever to their neighbour. They didn't even notice when he left them after they arrived at the circus and trode on the firm floor of the spacious cages. The pelicans kept walking round the cage, probably to rid themselves of the vacillating sensation of the railway cages.

Petka was also led away to a stall of his own in the stables but for some reason he stubbornly refused to stand there. He kept biting his rope and got loose. And eventually at night when nobody was looking, he got out of his stall and began wandering round the circus. He passed by the stables and sniffing the air, suddenly stood stock-still. He smelt something familiar, and went quickly towards it. He soon found the cage where the pelicans were ruffled up and dozing, and he settled down. He lay down comfortably and fell asleep. Everyone was amazed by what had happened but didn't disturb Petka any more. And thus began the lama's friendship with the pelicans.

It soon became clear that Petka was a very sociable creature. He was exceptionally inquisitive and now roamed freely in the wings of the circus, and without forgetting his pelican friends, made more and more new acquaintances. Wherever he appeared, Petka behaved grandly and austerely as if he were in charge of everything and so he was nicknamed the Governor in fun.

He got used to his new nickname and responded to it.

However, when he was pestered by someone, he looked haughtily with his dark-blue eyes, flattened his ears viciously and awarded the person with a spray of juicy spittle.

A manicurist was once sent round to Petka's elephant friends to smarten up their nails before the opening night and give them a special elephant-style manicure with some deluted lime.

Petka was, of course, right on the spot. Catching sight of the lama, the manicurist became confused and, waving his large rasp, shouted: "Shooh! Go away! Shooh!" Petka dashed off in fright but returned

within a couple of minutes, went straight up to the manicurist and spurted him with juicy spittle. Pleased to have retained his independence, Petka didn't leave the elephants again.

By and large, Petka developed an interesting relationship with the elephants. The huge, good-natured elephants weren't in the least offended by the Governor if he found some tasty titbit for himself in their feeds. And it was sometimes hard to say whether Petka preferred the company of the pelicans or the elephants.

It was soon time to move to another town. The animals had already begun to leave the circus for the station. What's more, each of them went in a different way. Ordinary artists like the pelicans always went on five-ton lorries but stars like the elephants majestically went on foot. And so, when the pelicans' cage was put onto the vehicle and driven off, Petka immediately went over to the elephants and wouldn't leave them. The latter were even grateful to him. They always stopped timidly and awkwardly by the train carriage before getting onto the rickety plank but seeing how lightly and gracefully Petka climbed onto it, the elephants calmly followed suit.

Within five days the journey was over and so was summer. Petka and his friends arrived at a circus in the North.

Everyone likes winter, of course. Even elephants don't mind it. They very much like the fluffy white snow but they don't like the cold and frost at all.

It was very cold the day they arrived. It was 30° C below zero.

Taking the elephants out of their warm carriages into the street in such cold weather to get them to the circus would have a disastrous effect on them. And so the circus management decided to order warm felt boots and sheepskin coats for the elephants.

Getting boots for an elephant is no joke! You need as much wool for one elephant's boot as you do for ten children's pairs!

The shoemakers worked the whole day long to get the elephants' boots ready. It was soon time to try them on. The shoemakers went confusedly and gingerly up to their "customers" and the latter reluctantly lifted their huge feet. You could well understand why: the shoemakers were doing an order of this kind for the first time and the elephants had never worn boots before.

However, the boots and sheepskins were ready, and they only had to be put on the elephants. But this wasn't so easy. The younger elephant refused to be dressed in the sheepskin and had to be rubbed all over with a thick layer of grease. To make up for it, both elephants agreed to having the boots pulled onto their enormous feet.

The animals were taken outside and suddenly Petka, who was looking for his elephant friends as usual, stood stock-still. He didn't recognise the elephants and stared in horror at them. One of the elephants looked almost the same as usual but her skin was glossy and a different colour. The other looked like a tall tent made of tarpaulin, fur and bronze buckles which looked like window frames. To crown it all—and this had the worse effect on Petka—the elephants' legs looked quite different. They could hardly lift their rigid pillar-like legs and moved like footballers in a slow-motion film.

The animal keepers tried to take Petka towards the elephants but he refused to go near them, stuck his fore-legs into the frozen ground and suddenly shied and ran through the streets, ignoring all the rules of the Highway Code.

The cars and buses stopped sharply at once: a militiaman loomed before Petka. This time the culprit was quite extraordinary and the militiaman confusedly clutched the book of fines in his hands.

Petka had to be taken from the station on his own, after all. He only stopped being nervous in the circus when the elephants' felt boots were taken off and they looked just the same as usual.

Time went by and when everyone had already forgotten about the elephants' boots and Petka's fright, Petka the Governor surprised the circus again, but this time he surprised everyone not by his fear but by his daring.

Petka who was still rehearsing was usually tied up when the performance began but one day he was forgotten about in the commotion and he arranged his own debut ahead of schedule. He walked up to the curtain the way he usually did and suddenly saw that something was wrong. The ring was in darkness and strange rustling sounds were coming from every direction. Petka had

always been excited by new sounds and smells and that's why he walked calmly on to find out. Suddenly he was riveted by a bright spotlight. He screwed up his eyes and then opened them. Some monstrous creatures, emitting strange sounds, flew down upon him from the top of the circus.

They landed and, to Petka's delight, turned out to be pelicans. Petka at once started prancing joyfully. Paying not the slightest notice of him, the pelicans walked towards the curtain. Petka ran forwards so that they could see him. The pelicans continued walking along. Then he barred their way and began pounding his hooves on the ground, raising showers of sawdust. The frightened pelicans flew in different directions.

The silly Governor! How could he know that a performance was going in the ring and that his bosom-friends, the pelicans, had to walk grandly round the ring!

At night after work Petka's trainer went to him and, although the Governor had gone out into the ring without permission, he gave him some sugar and congratulated him on his debut.

This was how Petka the Governor got used to daily life at the circus.

How the Pig Became a Trotter

In the morning the trainer spotted that Charlie the little pony was lame in the morning. Even the frightening cheetah riding in the small carriage did not excite him as much as usual. Charlie moved slowly at the rehearsal and the cheetah's act in the carriage had to be cancelled.

After the performance was over, the carriage with its small

harness was taken out of the ring for inspection but, as they had expected, it turned out to be in tip-top shape.

"The pony injured his leg in transit again. Of course, it's his foot he's dislocated," said the distressed trainer, looking over Charlie who was gloomily huddling against the barrier. "Leave the carriage and get cracking with the new animals. Let out the animals which need limbering up."

The trainer looked over Charlie again and went to take off his make-up.

Charlie was led away to the stables and the unused carriage was left standing.

The few animals that were left were kept in two cages. An ordinary pig lay stretched out in one. The second cage was strangely arranged. From the side it was shaped like the letter "L", standing upside down, the upper part of which was covered by a wire netting. A strange snake-like creature with a small head was rushing about behind the netting.

A keeper started back in fright: "This can't be a bird, can it?"

However, the creature was, in fact, a bird. Above the door of the cage there was a sign saying: "Teodoro the Ostrich from South Australia."

The keeper scratched the back of his head still staring with bulging round eyes at the snake-like bird, and murmured tenderly:

"Oh, it really is a bird! Oh, what big eyes you've got!"

He dragged the cage to the ring, opened the door and let out the bird. Then he hurriedly closed the passageway so that the barrier formed a complete circle.

The bird began running excitedly round the ring, kicking her legs up high. Suddenly she caught sight of the gaping hole in the harness and hurriedly shoved her head through it and began running round the ring with the carriage.

"Now, she's done it!" the keeper exclaimed angrily.

He didn't know how to unharness the voluntary driver and decided to watch over until the morning. In the early morning when the empty spectators' seats lit up by the sun seemed to be floating slowly out of a mist, and the coming day cast its light on the sawdust in the ring, the trainer, who had arrived for a rehearsal

was dumbstruck: the ostrich was lying in the ring, harnessed to the carriage. When she caught sight of the people, she scrambled up and dragged the carriage with her.

To cut a long story short, a couple of days later the cheetah rode out behind the jibbing two-legged ostrich which weaved this way and that and drove the confused predatory beast across the sawdust in such a way that the latter most likely thought that the ring was all pits and bumps.

However, this interesting act was taken off the programme less than a week later. The ostrich, which was just used to the carriage as to his cage, suddenly started behaving strangely. For days on end she pottered about her cage, dug holes and hardly touched her food. Then, one day as the keeper was cleaning out the cage, he discovered a huge green ostrich egg, which was ten times bigger than a hen's.

Obviously the gentle bird hadn't wanted to drive the predatory beast but did not know how to fight against it alone. So she decided to bring a whole batallion of baby ostriches into this world. But the ostrich didn't realise that she couldn't possibly bring this plan into effect when the circus was on tours all the time. Only her trainer, of course, could know this. He, however, was even grateful to the ostrich because many schools in the towns where his troupe of animals were performing added the ostrich eggs to their zoological collections. As a reward the trainer let the ostrich forget about the hateful carriage for a while.

And the trainer, pondering, looked at the cheetah again.

The keeper jokingly said: "Well, now all we can try is the pig!"

"Well, that might be interesting, too. What do you think? Bring the pig into the ring to me," the trainer said to the puzzled keeper.

Snorting and mincing comically, the pig walked slowly into the ring. It put on haughty airs as soon as it came to the circus. It was let out into the ring at once without any rehearsals. It had to lay out a roll of carpet on which the spectators read: "Durov is on today!" It was a simple trick. Every time it pushed the roll with its snout, the pig found a piece of bread. When it had unrolled the carpet and eaten all the bread, the audience applauded loudly and

the pig felt proud and confident. You see, it was the first of its kind to guzzle bread not in a pigsty but in a ring before an audience and to be such a tremendous success.

It now willingly let itself be harnessed to the carriage and even began unrolling the carpet without looking at its dangerous passenger. When the carpet was unrolled, the pig stopped and waited for the applause but instead she heard her trainer saying: "The carpet will have to run all round the ring. Only now we'll have on it: "Durov is on today with his four-legged artists." True, it would take a long time to read but, to make up for it, two acts would be rolled into an apparently quite good one.

Thus, the pig became a trotter and obediently carried out its duties. It was not afraid of the ferocious cheetah for its fat neck and harness prevented it from looking backwards and, what's more, it couldn't care less whom it was driving as long as it could munch tasty bits of bread all the time.

Pashka Enters the Ring Again

Pashka the sea lion was very like a sea lion on an ice-cream advertisement, especially when he arched his shiny neck, which looked as if it had been greased, caught a tub of artificial ice-cream and balanced it on the end of his nose for a few seconds. Then he gently shook his head and the tub landed back in the trainer's hands.

Of course, Pashka found it much easier juggling a ball and he almost always heard cries of "Encore! Encore!" and "Bravo! Bravo!" at the end of his act.

"Look! It's a sea lion but it's tossing the ball like a juggler,"

the spectators would say to one another and would shout "bravo" even louder.

But Pashka was only offended by compliments of this kind: he really was a natural juggler. Any professional would have envied him! You see, the sea lion didn't have to be taught how to juggle.

True, before he joined the circus, Pashka didn't know what the word "bravo" meant and had no idea that one day he would have to be content with the mirky green water of the big iron bath, which was essential when he travelled.

Now Pashka most likely regretted that when he once sprawled on the sun-warmed sand, he usually didn't care much about the white surf rolling back and forth.

But even then Pashka used to balance things. It was very easy to explain why. You see, the sea lion's cranium is tender and fragile like a small baby's and the sea lion is afraid of objects landing on its head and always tries to ward everything off with its nimble nose.

Of course, in the sea Pashka didn't do this to get a tasty fish as a reward. He then caught fish himself and, as he did so, tossed the fish in the air and nimbly caught it in his open mouth. It seemed like a game but, in fact, Pashka tossed the fish so that he could catch it head first. Otherwise the sharp tail fin might injure his throat.

He did the same thing in the ring, only this time the trainer was beside him and he had to do everything at his command, which was, of course, much more difficult than doing it outside of captivity.

Pashka had every right to consider himself one of the most outstanding animal performers. After all, he was a sea lion!

Then suddenly Pashka fell ill. It happened at a matinée performance in a suburban school where Pashka performed on a makeshift stage. He got so carried away that he didn't notice a long splinter pierce his flipper.

Pashka was a true artist and so, although he could hardly move, he performed at the evening performance, too. But a couple of days later he could no longer get up, and lying on his side, groaned and only turned his head when he heard water gushing into the pool.

His trainer called the best vets. They crowded round the cage, walked about but could not do anything to help.

"Yes, he's a difficult patient!" the vets announced in unison. "What can we do? We can't look at the wound because he won't let us come near. He needs a shot of penicillin but how can we give it to him?"

They talked to each other, exchanged glances and looked inquiringly at the anxious trainer. Pashka was brought a fish. He stretched towards the bowl in which it was lying but groaned with pain.

"Look here!" the trainer exclaimed. "What if you injected penicillin into the fish and then gave it to Pashka? He'd eat it and the penicillin would then get absorbed in his system."

The vets injected the small fish, which had just been unfrozen, and Pashka voraciously ate it.

"It would be a good idea to rinse his wound with some disinfectant now," said one of the vets but then stopped short and looked confusedly at the others.

"Well, that's quite simple," the trainer replied unexpectedly. "We'll pour some disinfectant into the pool and our patient won't jump in right away but once he gets used to the smell of the pool, he'll definitely climb in and swim. Well, and then his wound will be rinsed with the disinfectant."

And this is just what happened. Pashka didn't want to go in at first but when he saw he had no choice and there was no other water, he carefully walked towards the ladder, hardly treading on his large injured flipper, and lowered himself into the pool. He swam, snorting, stopped up his nostrils, and dived under the water. Then he surfaced and squinting at the amazed vets, began wallowing in the weak solution of disinfectant.

Who knows if this treatment helped Pashka or if he missed the noisy applause which rang out when he appeared and in some way reminded him of the surging waves in the far-off sea. Whatever the case, a few days later Pashka entered the ring again.

The Two Friends

Snowy and Bambi were two small dogs. The two friends were as unlike each other as fire and water. Snowy was from the North and had a thick, smart fur coat, and Bambi was a small African terrier which had a thin coat and only long moustache-like hairs on the warts round her muzzle.

Bambi sometimes felt cold even in the hottest Moscow summer. She tried to snuggle up in her quilted mat and if she had to run outside, she quickly pattered on her tiny feet, cringing and shivering nervously.

When the sun's rays lit up the house indoors and like spotlights fell on different parts of the floor, Bambi would always move towards them and as the cheerful sun's rays moved, Bambi would move with them, trying not to miss a single warm, life-giving ray. It was only then, I think, that she looked completely content. And at times like this small sun-warmed Bambi most likely couldn't understand why her friend Snowy was hiding from the hot sun somewhere under the sofa and panting heavily, her red tongue hanging out.

Bambi also couldn't understand Snowy's affection for their master. Bambi was only affectionate towards people whom she considered strong, and she bit those she wasn't at all afraid of. When their master went off somewhere and the dogs were left with one of the keepers, Bambi felt the same as usual but Snowy for some reason lost weight and pined in the evenings and wouldn't leave the door.

Everyone loved Snowy because she was an amazingly talented artist but said of artful Bambi that she was a rare breed of dog which was already becoming extinct and felt sorry for her and

spoilt her and treated her with great care. For the winter she was knitted a warm dogs' sweater which was to take the place of fur and she was only carried outside in someone's coat out of which she stuck her nose and looked curiously but condescendingly at everything around her.

And either because she was a rare, exceptional dog and she didn't have to work before an audience like Snowy, or because she understood she was fed and spoilt just for being who she was, Bambi became more and more stand-offish and unfriendly. She even looked upon kind Snowy's affection as something due to her and naturally considered the meat bones in Snowy's dinner her property.

True, Snowy had beautiful ribbon bows and a collar with a silver inscription marked with master's name and Bambi didn't because there was no point tying ribbons on her and a collar would have rubbed her skin which was as tender as human skin.

Bambi very much wanted to have something of her own to keep for herself. That's why she could often be seen guarding a bone which had been picked long ago.

Bambi's master didn't like this habit of hers. He took the bone away from her but didn't throw it away: he knew that Bambi would be sure to find it and guard it again, growling at everyone, and so he put the bone on his writing desk so that Bambi could see it. On the desk there were always a couple of bones, an elephant's tooth, a deer's antlers and an ostrich egg.

Bambi often watched the desk, guarding the bones.

One day their master was visited by some people and he started telling them about the strange objects lying on the desk. He told them about the elephant's tooth and the deer's antlers, but he felt rather embarassed when he had to explain why Bamby's little treasure was there. He solemnly raised a finger and said jokingly: "Oh, here's something very rare! A boa constrictor's set of teeth!"

One of the guests leant over to look at the snake's non-existent teeth but Bambi began growling viciously and her master laughed and made Snowy sit on her hind legs and dance a waltz.

Snowy could do everything but all Bambi could do was ride without a ticket wherever they went. She was especially good at

sniffiing out ticket controllers. A controller would sometimes appear and Bambi would at once disappear and only a strange bulge would be left in her master's jacket.

Snowy always travelled with a ticket like a real artist.

And Bambi probably envied Snowy. One day, however, she got a chance to perform in the ring. Their master was given a good satirical piece to act about a bureaucrat who was "flayed" and sent packing.

After thinking awhile, their master decided that the bureaucrat would be "flayed" in a box which was standing before the audience. The infuriated clown would drag flinching shaggy Snowy into the box and a minute later he would drag a pathetic-looking, tiny naked creature out of it instead.

"Ha, he got what was coming to him!"

"Serves him right!" the audience would chuckle.

And the naked creature, which, of course, was Bambi, gazed round and stood, shaking with fear before the audience in the spotlights.

She was ordered from behind the curtain: "Bambi! Come here!"

But she didn't hear. She was shaking and frightened and instead of running quickly to her master, she suddenly began howling woefully.

Then something unexpected happened. The top of the box opened and the "old bureaucrat" joined the new one before the audience. Loyal Snowy hurried to Bambi's rescue and the dogs quickly disappeared behind the curtain. And although someone shouted: "He got his skin back!", the act was spoilt.

When the dogs got home, their master scolded Snowy. He was in a bad temper forgetting that the talented artist had let him down for the first time in his life.

Offended and unjustly accused, Snowy lay by her friend, warming her as usual, and looking at them, their master suddenly felt hostile towards the totally useless but rare, well-groomed dog.

He wanted to go over and punish Bambi but changed his mind. You see, she was, after all, from a rare breed which was becoming extinct.

Ninny

Ninny, Infection and Clara were the names of the crow which my friend Nikita picked up in the hospital yard. Nikita's mother was in hospital and he visited her in the mornings. He wasn't allowed in to see his mother because her ward was considered infectious, so he could only talk to her through the window of her room.

His mother's face was pinched, yellow and through the green-tinted glass her head, which was wrapped in a white towel, reminded him of the very first photo of his grandmother which had been taken at the turn of the century. Now the photo had been enlarged and his grandmother looked dark and unnatural against the misty white background. Nikita didn't like this photo and when he saw how his mother looked, he became frightened.

"Mummy, Mummy!" Nikita said slowly and confusedly.

"How are you getting on? You aren't arriving late for school? Who's cooking your meals—Daddy?" His mother was quietly and very sadly happy, seeing Nikita.

Daddy's a bad cook. He makes cabbage soup and forgets to add potatoes and so puts noodles in instead. Then in the mornings he keeps giving me yoghurt, and nothing but yoghurt. And then he tells me off when I get low marks at geography. Mummy, you once said that a growing boy needs sugar but yoghurt's sour and that's why I've started getting bad marks. Nikita wanted to tell his mother all this but for some reason he didn't start complaining, raised his sad eyes towards his mother and said cheerfully: "We're getting on fine. We're missing you. Are you going to come home soon, Mum?"

His mother wanted to reply but she waved her hands at Nikita and quickly went away from the window. Nikita guessed at once that a doctor had come into her room and he couldn't talk to his mother anymore.

In the evening Nikita phoned me.

"Natasha! Come quick! I must talk to you!"

"Since he's phoned me and in the evening, too, it means something serious has happened and he needs help," I decided. I immediately went to him and heard him say: "Come on! What else can I call you to make you eat?"

I saw Nikita squatting on his heels by a crow. Its wings were sagging and its feathers were bedraggled as if someone hadn't finished plucking it.

"Look what I've got! When she's fed, she still slobbers. She's sick, you know, but Daddy shouted: 'It's infected! Get the crow out of here this minute! When I get back, I don't want to see any sign of it!' Oh, it's such a pity Mummy isn't here! Ask Daddy, he..."

Nikita felt wretched and so did the crow and I, to tell you the truth, didn't feel much better. On the one hand, there was Nikita and the sick crow and on the other, there was us adults who had to be fair. I guessed where the crow had come from but began asking in a roundabout way: "Have you been for a walk somewhere?"

"I went to see Mummy."

"I see. How's your mother feeling?"

"Bad. Now, if she were at home... What can I cure the crow with? Please tell me..."

"Hang on. Let's first find out where the crow comes from."

"How?"

"Very simply. We'll talk to her. But where did you find her?"

"On the street," Nikita replied reluctantly and turned away.

"I see! So you were walking down the street, and quite by chance came across this crow! I'll find everything out right now but will you please go out so that I can talk to the crow in private."

"But can you really?"

"What a question! Haven't you seen my animals, then? I've always been excellent at talking in bird and animal languages, Nikita! Go on, leave us. The sooner I find out about the crow, the faster we can put her on her wings again."

Nikita went out. I bent over the crow and examined her. The crow was obviously sick but I couldn't tell what was wrong with it. It was dangerous to leave it here because Nikita might fall ill. There were rustling and puffing sounds from behind the door. Nikita was, of course, eavesdropping on our conversation. What should I do? I felt sorry for Nikita who was missing his mother. It would be awful to take the crow away from him, too. No, I couldn't. Nikita would have to decide for himself.

"Nikita! Nikita!"

"Well?..." Nikita walked in cautiously and glumly.

"Why are you displeased? Unlike you the crow told me the whole truth. Listen, I'll translate everything for you from bird language so that you can understand. The crow is twenty-seven years old. She's the same age as you. You're nine and she's three times older, but that doesn't matter because crows live three hundred years and not one hundred like people. Count for yourself. She was a real nuisance in her family and took after her father. Her father was a real crow and did everything the wrong way. His daughter foolishly followed his example and didn't obey anyone either. When she was told not to lean out of the nest or fly far away from the flock because she might come to some harm, the crow decided that this was nonsense. That's why she always looked inquisitively at bright, shining objects and flew far away from the flock. One day a boy threw a silver ball at her. He missed and she could have flown away but she liked the ball so much that she grabbed it in her beak, perched on a branch and began examining it. Suddenly there was a bang and flapping her wings violently, she dropped onto the ground without even cawing. Since then Ninny the crow has become even more stupid. She foolishly stopped mixing with birds of her own age and was only friendly with older birds although she understood nothing about their lives. Her friends got fed up with her and simply forgot her. They always ate the corn and crusts of bread, meant for pigeons, themselves. Ninny became ugly and thin and her feathers stuck out like a mop and she was more like a scare-crow than a crow. She paid no attention to her studies.

"I don't want to study. I don't want to learn how to read or write. I'm the thinnest of us. That's why I can fly faster than the

rest and birds which fly fast from one place to another, don't need to study."

One day the silly crow flew alone above the town and spotted a large beautiful, white building. Even the people were all dressed in white coats. She was pleased by this but even more pleased when she saw near this house some huge metal containers, which were as tall as human beings. Their lids were open and they had an attractive, familiar name: "Rubbish bins".

"I must wash before meals. Even Granny used to say that. I will wash, I will," decided the silly crow and without a moment's hesitation, bathed in the steaming refuse and then tucked into her dinner. After stuffing herself full, she suddenly felt beautiful. Her crop puffed out and her feathers lay evenly and smoothly on her back. She would now look more attractive than the other crows, she thought, and she began to strut about proudly. She flew to the flock and gazed silently and gloatingly at her friends...

"I won't tell them my secret for anything in the world and I'll eat everything myself."

She remained silent until the evening but then she, of course, revealed the secret of her new picnic spot. In the morning the crows rushed after her, cawing hungrily.

They flew to the white building but Ninny was the only one to stay behind to eat breakfast. The crows, you see, were older and had already read a book about hospitals and illnesses which were called by the attractive but terrible name of "infection". This was how Ninny began to be called "Infection" and she was at once deserted by the other crows which didn't want to fly with her.

The next morning people spotted Ninny by the rubbish bins. They brought a lot of food and the silly crow was very happy and wanted to fly towards it but since the previous day she had grown heavier and weaker. A couple of hours passed but she couldn't make herself eat. She managed to crawl to a drain-pipe and tried to bathe and spread out her wings but she couldn't tuck them under her again and so she sadly sat with her wings stretched out by the drain-pipe. This was when my friend Nikita found her. "Well, Nikita, do you see now that I know everything. You found the crow by your mother's hospital, didn't you?"

"Yes!" replied Nikita and looked imploringly into my eyes. "We can't let her die, can we, Natasha? You'll cure her, won't you. I promise I won't get low marks at geography again."

"Alright, Nikita, I'll try to cure and train your crow but, don't forget, you must know geography and not just geography but natural science and everything you're being taught at school. If your friends ask you where your crow flies to and which countries it sees and perhaps ask whether she's a migrant bird, what will you tell them?"

Nikita remained silent.

The next morning the crow settled on the window-sill in my flat. For the first few days she was quiet and didn't attract anyone's attention. She didn't even react to the dogs. She soon got better but Nikita wouldn't leave me in peace.

"Natasha, you promised to train the crow, you know!"

"Alright, Nikita," I said. "But it's not as simple as you think. First the bird has to be tamed so that she will never fly away and will sit quietly on my hand, and on the table when she will have to perform."

But Nikita was impatient. We went to a children's department store together and bought a small abacus, two identical rattles and a pyramid made of different-coloured rings.

"So now, Nikita, you can train the crow yourself."

"How?" Nikita asked in amazement.

"In order to teach the crow how to count on the abacus and move the beads with her beak, we'll put it on her window-sill today and in a couple of days she'll get used to it."

Two days later Nikita ran to me: "Natasha, can we train her now?"

I smiled: "Well, let's have a go. Put some worms, which she likes best, under the abacus and watch carefully how she behaves."

Nikita put the worms under the abacus. The crow couldn't reach them from any angle. Then she moved a bead with her beak and got a worm. She leant on one leg and began pecking angrily at the abacus and immediately moved two balls. She ate another worm. She had now got the hang of things. She ate her fill and at the same time learnt how to move the beads.

"Now listen carefully, Nikita. For a few days you'll make the crow get her breakfast in this way and when she's got used to it, you'll outwit her. When she begins moving the beads you'll give her breakfast out of your hands. And each time she moves them correctly, you'll increase her reward. When she has got the hang of the abacus, you'll start her on the pyramid. You'll place egg crumbs for her under each ring. Then you'll take the crumbs away again and each time she takes a ring off the pyramid, you'll reward her with some crumbs."

Six months passed. It was summer and Nikita went away to a Young Pioneers' camp. One Sunday Nikita's mother and I went to visit him. When we arrived, Nikita wasn't in sight.

"He's busy," the Young Pioneers' leader told us. "We've been waiting for you. Our concert is about to begin."

Nikita's mother and I sat in the first row.

"You know, Natasha, Nikita has prepared a surprise for you," Nikita's mother looked at me and laughed.

I looked at the stage and the piano on it.

"Well," I thought to myself, "Nikita's probably going to play my favourite piece by Tchaikovsky in the concert today."

Nikita was announced. A small table was carried out. Then Nikita came out and who do you think was sitting on his hand? Ninny! I looked in surprise at the stage and noticed that Nikita had copied my gestures exactly.

"What always happens immediately before a lesson?" Nikita asked the audience.

"A bell's rung!" the children replied in unison.

The crow went up to the bell, pulled a cord and a melodious bell rang.

"The first lesson is reading," Nikita announced.

The crow quietly leafed through a book whose pages were made of plywood.

"And now count on the abacus. You know, she rattles them just like a real accountant!" Nikita praised the crow. "She defends herself with her beak and gets food with it. Now she'll give you a gym display and show you how she makes her beak stronger.

A wooden appliance shaped like the letter "T" was standing on

the table and rattles were hanging on either side of it. The crow went up the rattles and began turning them wildly.

"Well done, Nikita, you're a first-rate trainer!" Nikita's mother and I applauded.

After the performance Nikita ran up to me and said: "Well, Natasha, will you take my artist Clara? She's been an amateur for long enough. Our Pioneer leader says that she's already an artist and could perform in a circus."

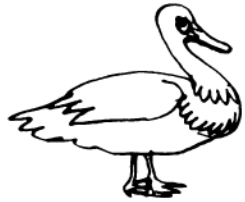
"Wait a minute, isn't this Ninny?"

"Of course, it is. Only you see, Natasha, it's just not fair to call such a clever bird Ninny, so now she's Clara."

"Clara?" I repeated.

"That's right! She caws just like the wild crows in the field here. She hears them cawing and replies. I let her loose, thinking she would fly into the field but she followed me, cawing all the time as if she were angry I wanted to part with her. What a girl, Clara!"

As soon as Nikita had said its new name, the crow cawed and began cleaning her beak on his jacket.



The Wild Duck

In the menagerie a wild duck spent the winter months in the same pool as some seagulls. Three large quarrelsome birds drove her into the far corner of the pool, pecked her with their bright wax-like beaks and then swam merrily enjoying themselves.

The mottled wild duck only appeared unobtrusively in the pool at the first sound of children's voices. The excursion parties quickly passed by and the seagulls chased her away again.

Sometimes the wild duck was taken to perform in a fairy-tale show in which a dog's birthday was celebrated and woodland and domestic animals came to congratulate him and the wild duck was among them. The children simply watched this fairy-tale but for the duck it was real life. And although the woodland in it wasn't real and even if she touched a branch with her beak, it didn't move or even stir, because the wood was simply drawn on a piece of canvas, the duck no longer had another wood and she even loved the fairy-tale in which she could walk calmly about not being afraid of the seagulls, just like when she was free.

After the show the seagulls angrily punced on her. They screeched, vying with each other, and threatened her. They were also wild, from the furthest part of the North, but whereas the duck was now almost tame, they were still wild and malicious.

The duck looked at them for a while and then the pool probably began to seem to her like an ice-hole and the seething seagulls like greyish-white hummocks of snow. Every day she waited to return to the fairy-tale and when the cage was brought up to the pool to take the animals away, the duck instantly dived into the water. The seagulls flew after her, screeching, as if there wasn't a duck in the pool but a hunk of fish which they had been thrown and couldn't share between them.

But the duck swam intrepidly towards her fairy-tale...

Thus the winter passed and soon slanting weak rays of sunlight began to play on the pool's mirky water. The seagulls became livelier but their cries were still like howling snowstorms and the duck shivered with cold. The malicious seagulls had recently taken her fairy-tale away from her. With a wounded wing, the weak and often hungry duck began to walk about in the fairy-tale as she always did in her cage. But a fairy-tale is something special and since then it had ended for the wild duck and she no longer waited for the summer.

The seagulls, on the other hand, became stronger and their white feathers fitted so closely together that one might have thought that their round heads weren't smoothly covered with feathers but soft fine leather. Now the seagulls often stretched their wings. Even in the evening when it began to grow dark in the menagerie, it seemed to the duck that sun rays were still playing on the seagulls.

The three quarrelsome birds were so dazzling that the white colour on their heads and breasts seemed unnaturally bright and their grey backs and wings blended together in one light colour. Their streamline bodies were supported by thin, spindly legs and webbed feet, and when the seagulls ran it seemed as if they were flying, so swift and light were their movements.

The duck sat for weeks by the water but could only smell it. While the seagulls were swimming and bathing themselves, spray flew towards her but she didn't care. Why? She had stopped fighting over the water and food long ago. She became quiet and subdued and didn't care whether summer came or not.

One day the seagulls were taken out of the cage and their wings were clipped. Then they and the wild duck were let out into the summer pool. By the pool there were green bushes and the sky above was azure and the water translucent and when the seagulls swam, you could see their feet paddling.

A merry twinkle appeared in the duck's eyes. Hesitantly, she walked towards the glittering path of sunlight on the water's surface of the pool but the seagulls at once attacked her. She immediately popped under a bush and reached for a green leave to see if it was made on canvas or not. The leaf turned out to be real and fragrant. For a few more seconds she stared hard at the azure sky, the green bush and the clear water and then tucked her head under her wing. She was aroused by a cry and saw two big ordinary-looking geese plodding steadily into the pool. Slicing the water, the seagulls flew swiftly towards them but the geese entered the water, swam about without paying any attention to them, arched their beautiful necks, then fiercely rebuffed the seagulls. The three quarrelsome birds huddled by the fence, screeching plaintively. Only some seagulls' feathers were floating in the pool.

The duck looked at the geese which were gliding across the water like two large steamers. She looked at them for a long time and then suddenly went up to the water's edge, slid down into the pool and was rocked like a little boat on the waves created by the steamer-like geese.

The wild duck wasn't at all afraid of these big domestic birds because, you see, she had also become a little domestic duck.

The Story of Little Fomka

White with black and grey spots, she was very striking among the rats of her colony. All the rest were very grey and large and they were all afraid of music and light but considered themselves to be very special. You see, the rat colony was in a real circus. The round barrier, which bordered the sawdust-covered ring, wasn't a bad home. The rats built houses, dug a food-cellar and at night they organised sports competitions in the ring itself, which was then at their disposal. Sometimes they punished their prisoners on it: white rats which had run away from their trainers. Of course, the white rats, which ran away from their cages didn't suppose that the colony of rats would treat them in this way. "What difference does it make if our coat is white or grey?" they thought. "After all, a rat's heart still beats beneath it."

But the colony had strict laws. Only grey rats could live here. It wasn't for nothing that the colony was called "The Grey Barrier".

"Spare us, we're also from the circus," their prisoners wailed.

But their wails were in vain. Looking at the white rats' red eyes, the henchman only became madder.

"Huh, just listen to them!" said Old Mumbler, the head of the colony. "From the circus!" she squeaked ominously and swishing her tail, declared: "We share the same circus top but our lives are different. Don't forget, people also live under the same sky. You, wretches, try to entertain people whoever they are but we give people work. They catch us and look for all sorts of powders to wipe out our rat colony. Yes, we give them work!"

The doomed prisoners replied that people didn't need this sort of work but nobody listened to them.

Fomka used to shout with all the rest: "Execute them!" She was then still young and the white spots were hardly discernible in her fur. Now she was a year old and these spots had become bigger and she was now piebald. It was perhaps because she was like both sorts of rats that she stayed out of it. Old Mumbler didn't let her out of her sight and her granddaughter had to obey her. Fomka opened her mouth soundlessly only for the sake of appearances.

But in the evening when she heard the music, she quietly crept up to a crack and watched the performance. Among all the different kinds of animals there were rats like the prisoners, which did all sorts of incredible tricks. Together with a large whiskered cat they flew up in a plane to the top of the dome.

Fomka couldn't hide her delight even from Old Mumbler. She knew that her grandmother was most afraid of cats and cleaning-women.

"Well, so what about cats! Elephants, for instance, are afraid of us," the old rat told her but then she got angry with Fomka and complained to her neighbours: "I didn't keep my eyes open and then my daughter gave birth to Fomka. Her father's white, that's for sure. Oh, how dreadful it is!" But she went on patiently telling Fomka to be careful: "You can go out hunting when it's dark and quiet and the collapsible seats have grown cold and stiff. Repeat that to me..."

Fomka squeakily repeated Old Mumbler's words but when she went out hunting for food, she feasted on melted ice-cream and then made a stool for herself out of the empty carton cup. Then the entertaining show began for the baby rats.

This is what she did.

Sixteen bottles were standing on high pedestals in the ring. A cat walked proudly over them and the white mice crawled between the bottles. Then the bottles were cleared away and a rope was stretched across the ring. The mice crawled along it in a row and the cat followed on their heels.

"It's wonderful! Oh, how wonderful!" Fomka exclaimed and she couldn't resist jumping out of her crack.

"Why aren't you rehearsing, you lazybones? And why are you so dirty?" a voice boomed out above her.

"She's followed me," thought Fomka and raised her head to say "I won't ever do it again" to grandmother.

But instead of grandmother, she saw a trainer before her. Fomka was so confused that she didn't even have time to bite him. The trainer lifted her up and put her on a high pedestal. Fomka then became totally confused. The mice began squealing but they were ordered to walk on, and forgetting about Fomka, they crawled along the rope. Fomka also hurried after them. As she crawled along she thought about doing something remarkable. "These white mice must accept me. I'm brave, too, and I'm not afraid of the cat!"

And seeing the cat's paw above her, she dug her teeth into it.

The cat howled and started running. The rope began rocking but the rats, like ears on unripe corn, held on tightly.

"I beg your pardon but what was this for? I demand justice. I've been insulted!" the cat exclaimed.

"We'll have to sort things out, my dear cat. She's probably a newcomer," drawled a large white rat.

"Well, I'll have you know, that if there are more new ones like her, I'll lose all four of my paws!"

The rehearsal stopped and a small cage was brought. The cat, limping, entered it first and the mice scurried after the cat.

"Come on, let's go. There's no point hanging about," someone pushed Fomka and she also ended up in the cage.

Soon they were all transferred to a large cage in which there was a beautiful hotel for the mice. Fomka found all this remarkable. There were special baths for bathing in, food boxes and games pitches. The only thing missing was the food-cellar.

"We don't need one. You see, we're brought fresh food every morning and evening," the rats explained to her but the others glanced mistrustfully at her. However, all the white mice without exception seemed kind and good to Fomka. Only the cat drove her to despair. He lived in the same cage but didn't sleep in the little hotel. There wasn't room for the cat in there and so he slept on a

cushion by the hotel and went on purring in a frightening way like a ventilator all day and all night.

However, the cat wasn't at all like a cooling appliance. On the contrary, he acted as a heater for the rats in winter.

"And don't they make him catch you?" Fomka asked in amazement'

"Don't be daft! We work together for people."

At the word "people" Fomka looked fearfully round and was surprised when she saw a cleaning-woman. In the daylight she looked quite different. She didn't look like a huge dark shadow and she had blue eyes and ruddy cheeks.

"We probably became grey from the dark," Fomka thought.

"Take a rest now. We've got a performance in the evening, you know," the white mice suggested to her.

Fomka tried to doze and strangely enough, the cat's purring seemed like music in her sleep.

But at the performance in the evening Fomka almost died of happiness. The diamond-like ring was flooded with all the colours of the rainbow. Fomka even felt that she was the smallest facet of this huge diamond which was making the ring shine. Her paws joyfully danced in time to a waltz. Fomka was no worse than the leading rat artists and she soon even performed among the first five and therefore got onto the rope before the others. But when the cat's paw appeared above her again, Fomka's head started spinning, her paws slipped off the rope and she fell onto the sawdust. The trainer pretended that nothing had happened but Fomka began to run. Suddenly the light stopped her by beating straight in her eyes. Blind from the light, disgrace and shame, Fomka hit her nose against the barrier as she searched for her crack.

Old Mumbler looked vigilantly at her granddaughter. She wanted to start squeaking so that Fomka realised where the crack was, but she stopped herself. She couldn't put her whole colony at risk because of Fomka. However, Old Mumbler couldn't keep silent and when Fomka's tail appeared near the crack, she stuck out her head, grabbed Fomka by the tail and pulled her inside the barrier. After the brightly-lit ring the colony seemed even more unattractive to Fomka: it was damp, rather dark and slippery! She could hardly

find her way in the dark and followed Old Mumbler whose tail monotonously rustled.

Old Mumbler didn't scold her granddaughter. She walked unhurriedly along, puffing and moving her jaws. Fomka felt even guiltier. For the first time Grandmother's puffs seemed like restrained sobbing. That's why Fomka didn't start saying to her as usual: "I won't ever do it again." She bent towards Old Mumbler's bony paw and timidly licking it, whispered sadly: "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. It's so wonderful there. I'm sorry."

Old Mumbler remained silent. Thus they entered their house in silence as if a rat-trap was somewhere near.

"It's wonderful there, did you say? You're silly, Fomka! Silly! I haven't knocked any common sense into you. You know, the rats there are even worse off than those on ship. Do you understand? A ship rat will abandon a sinking ship, you see. We'll live as long as there's land. Do you hear, we'll live!"

Fomka rushed towards her grandmother. A slimy and slippery pebble moved under her feet and Fomka fell heavily.

"You've even forgotten how to walk. That's people, light and those white rats for you!" Old Mumbler squeaked spitefully. "Come on!"

Fomka couldn't walk. She kept tripping and kicked up stones under her paws and bumped into her grandmother. The pebbles prevented her from running and so did her thoughts because she was still picturing her great, unusual day. Little Fomka thought: "It's better to be a pebble on the road than slime on a pebble which prevents one from moving. I won't stay here. I won't stay in this backward place."

Fomka told nobody about this but the next day she was on time at the rehearsal in the ring.

And that's the end of her story.

All that I want to tell you, children, is that when you see rats at a circus performance, look among them for a piebald rat. She really is called Fomka and she came to the rats' cage from the circus barrier.

Timka the Hedgehog and Flash the Mouse

The storm began in the morning. The light sky at once became dark. Lightning began springing through the black storm-clouds, splitting them for an instance and flooding with fiery streams. The lightning struck the crowns of trees, which creaked, shook and keeled but remained standing firmly. The trees with thick trunks weren't afraid of thunder but the leaves tremored and shook with fear, trying in vain to escape, but the wind mercilessly drenched their foliage with slanting jets of rain.

The thunder had an effect on everyone and even the things in my room became gloomier and darker. Only the wall-clock kept on ticking for it knew that the storm would pass in time.

I was waiting for the storm to be over and looking at the dark ball of wool in the corner. Immediately after a clap of thunder, the ball suddenly began to cringe and get bigger and if one went up closer, one could see that it was puffing quickly. Of course, one could only mistake the spiky ball with a tail for a ball of wool at a distance. In fact, I was standing before my two friends — Timka and Flash. Timka was a hedgehog and Flash was a mouse.

Does that surprise you? Yes, you're right, they're age-old enemies but anything can happen in thunderstorms! So, read on!

One day when I arrived at a Young Pioneers' camp, a heavy thunderstorm started. The thunder crashed and banged and was soon over. The children and I set off into the woods and there we saw a large tree which had been knocked down by the wind and had crushed a young sapling as it fell. The crown of the tree where the branches seemed so fragile that if you blew on them, they'd begin rustling, had crushed a she-hedgehog. She was lying stretched out and a small hedgehog was poking her side with its muzzle and jumping away from her each time her needles pricked its nose.

The children picked it up and said: "Take it. You've got a lot of animals, haven't you! It'll grow up and become a circus performer. Please take it."

I waved my arms in dismay but took the hedgehog and decided that even if it didn't become a performer, it would help me out. There was a mouse in my old sideboard and although I spend a lot of time with animals, I'm afraid of mice and can't stand mice-traps. When I walked past the sideboard my heart always sank. So, I decided that the baby hedgehog would grow up and catch this mouse.

I had only just got home when I was told I need not be afraid to walk past the sideboard from now on. There was a violent thunderstorm, and the mouse got frightened, jumped out of the sideboard and was at once caught by the dogs.

"What are we going to do now? The hedgehog's been left without a job," I said.

And so the hedgehog began to live with us. In the daytime it hid away from the dogs and at night it tried to keep time faster than the clock. When I woke up I sometimes couldn't make out whether it was the clock ticking or the hedgehog scurrying across the room in which there was a parquet floor instead of soft grass which was why he made a tapping sound very much like the clock.

Two days passed. On the third morning I was going to feed the hedgehog but stopped stock-still in surprise. The little hedgehog was tapping across the room towards the saucer of milk, followed by a minute little mouse which had hardly any fur. He had obviously sat for two days in the sideboard, waiting for his mother but she still hadn't returned. Then the baby mouse slipped out and became totally confused. He saw the hedgehog and the silly thing took him for his mother. His new mother looked almost the same except he didn't have a tail and was so prickly that the mouse couldn't warm himself against his side. However, the mouse was stubborn and kept very close to the hedgehog.

All my four-legged pets were worried by their new neighbours. The dogs were especially outraged by the unexpected tenants and arching their tails, attacked the baby creatures. In a second the dogs started howling and hid under the couch and the prickly ball was left alone on the floor.

But where had the mouse gone? I searched, looked high and low

in the flat but couldn't find it. Towards the evening the friends were scurrying across the floor again and I noticed that as soon as they were threatened by danger, the mouse vanished and only a prickly ball — Timka the hedgehog — was left on the floor. That's why the mouse which vanished in a trice came to be known as Flash.

The friends soon grew up and I found out where Flash was hiding. As soon as the dogs came near them, Timka curled up in a ball and Flash's tail stuck out from under him.

My friend once came to see me and hearing that I had a hedgehog, she said: "We've got so many mice in our flat! You wouldn't lend me the hedgehog just for a day, would you?"

"Alright," I agreed.

I wrapped Timka in a handkerchief and gave him to my friend.

Little Flash rushed round the room in search of his friend and in desperation rushed at the dogs and my huge dogs ran away from the mouse with their tails between their legs!

When Flash had grown tired of looking for Timka and had settled down by the saucer of milk, the door bell rang.

I opened the door and saw my friend.

"What on earth have you given me?" my friend asked angrily.

"What do you mean? A hedgehog!"

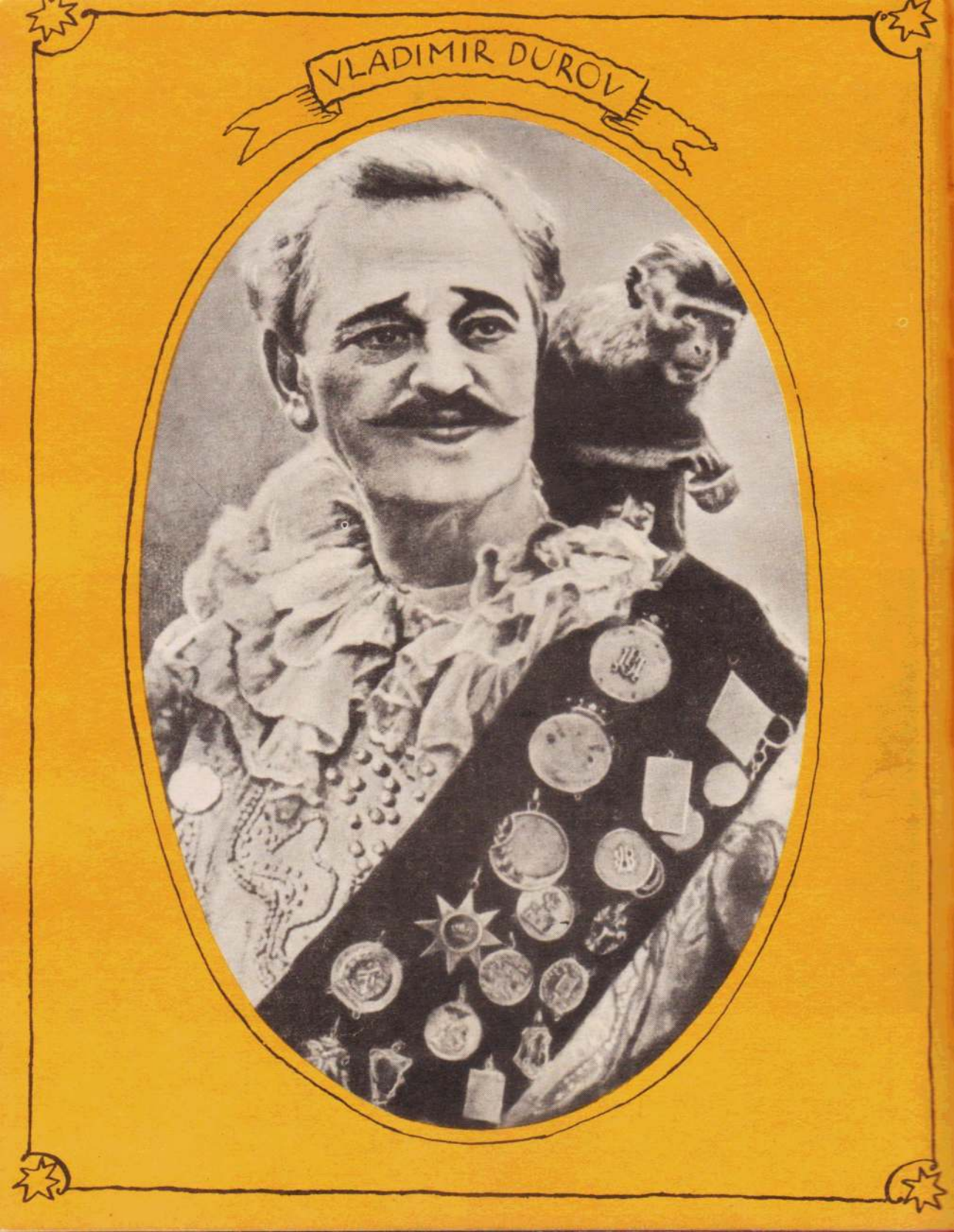
"Some hedgehog! All it did was play games with our mice. You can have him back."

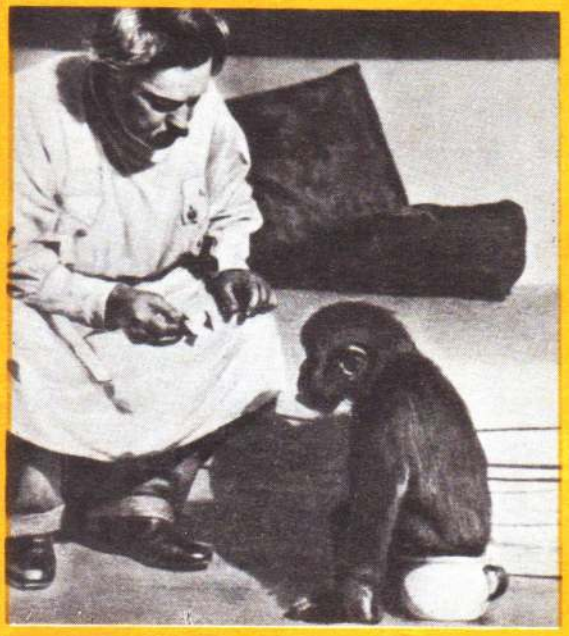
But seeing how Timka and Flash greeted one another, she understood that he thought all mice were Flashes. Because of his mouse friend the hedgehog had lost his "qualifications" as a mouse catcher. But, of course, only the thunderstorm was to blame for this: it had taken the baby's mother away from him and nobody could teach Timka the hedgehog to catch Flash, or Flash the mouse to be afraid of Timka.

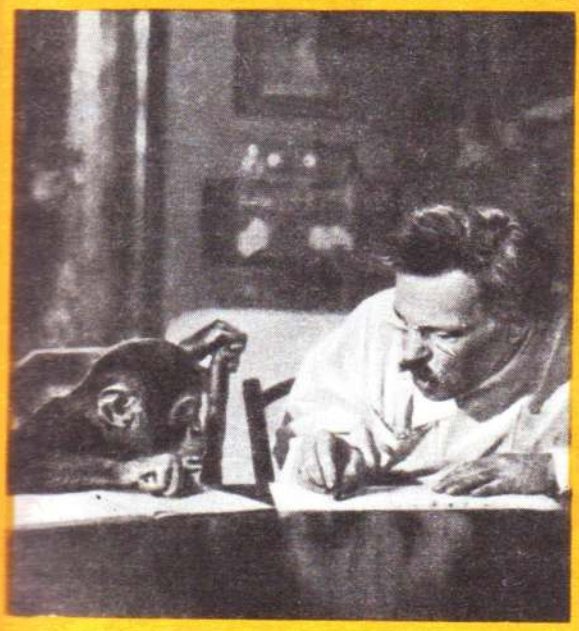
Yes, anything can happen in thunderstorms.

By the way, while I was telling you about Timka and Flash, the thunder passed. Yes, of course, it must have passed because Timka, followed by Flash, have started scurrying across the floor again.

FAMILY PHOTOS


VLADIMIR DUROV





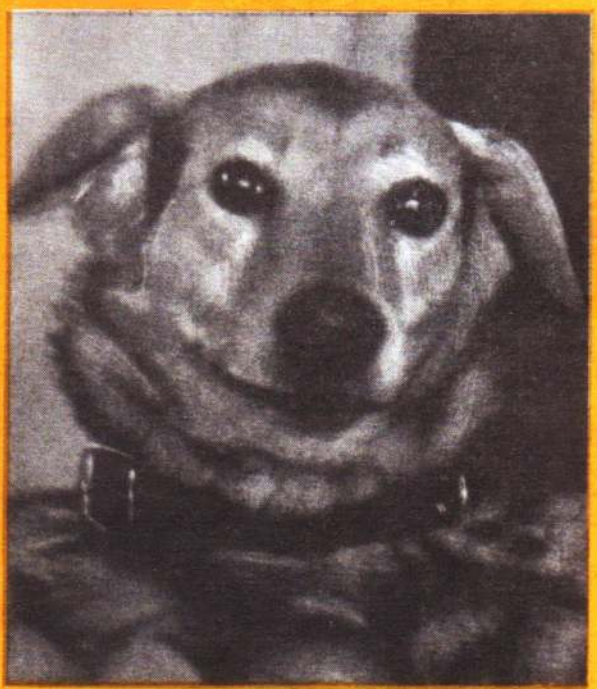
Vladimir Durov with his animals

YURI DUROV

Natalia Durova with Starry

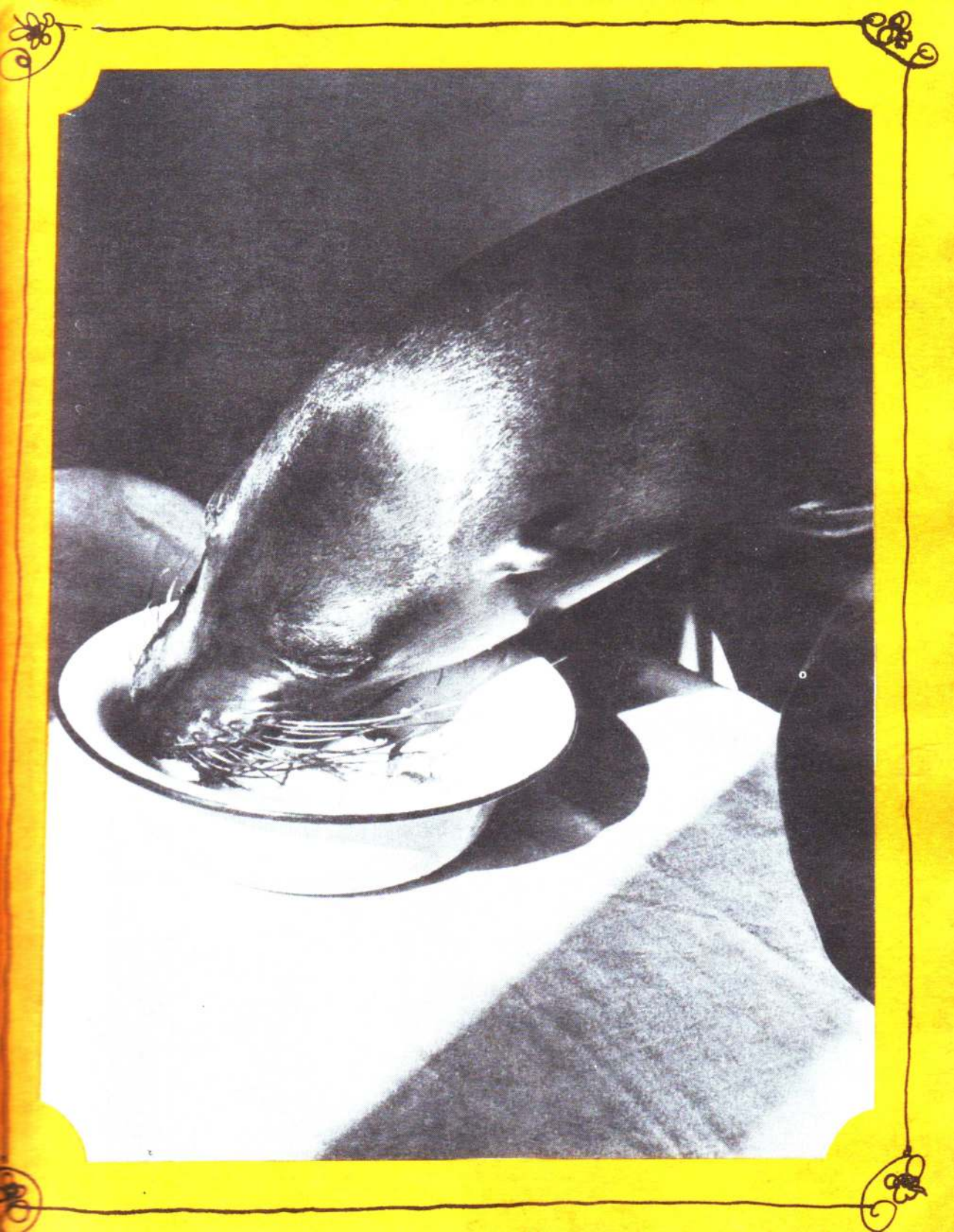
Natalia Durova and her father

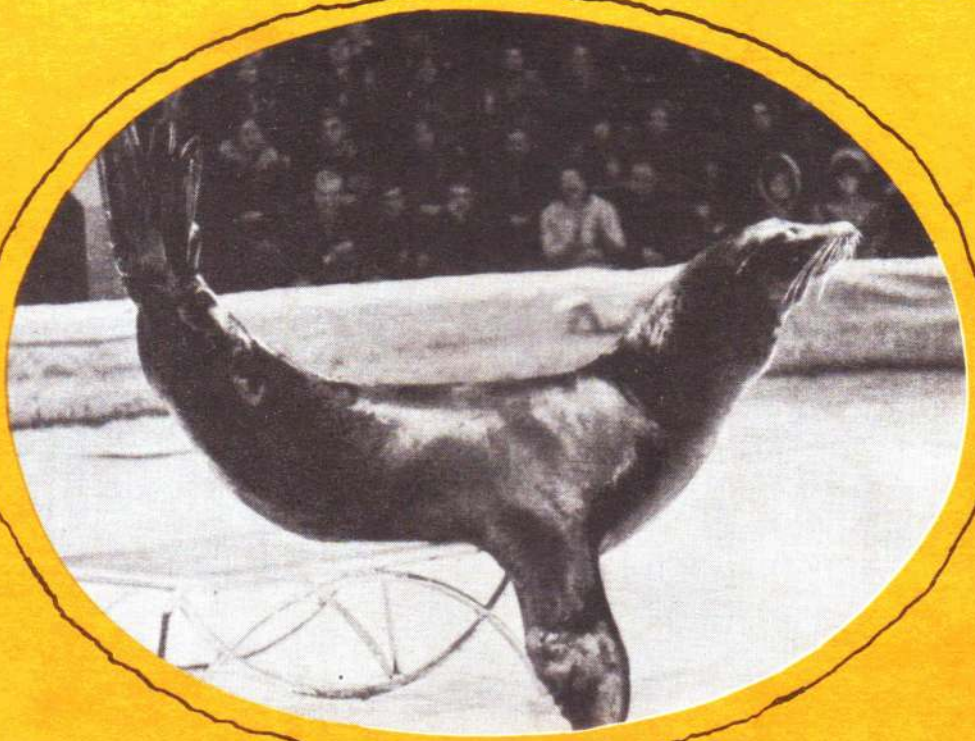
Natalia Durova with a cheetah

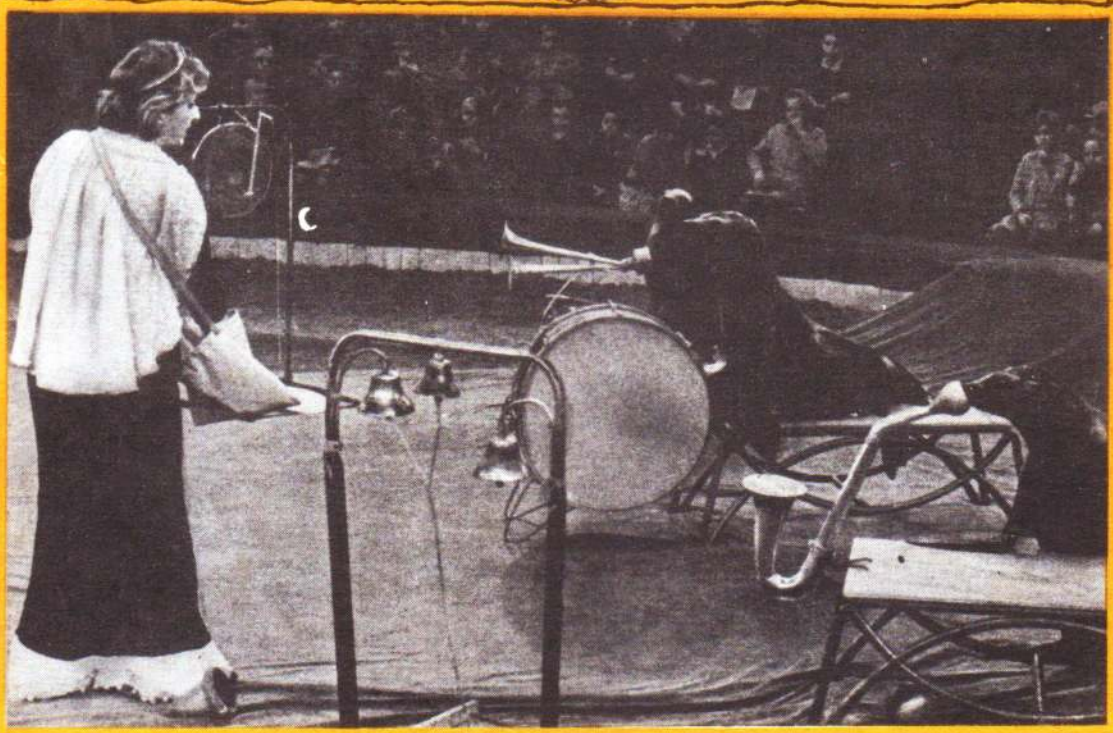


Natalia Durova with her animals

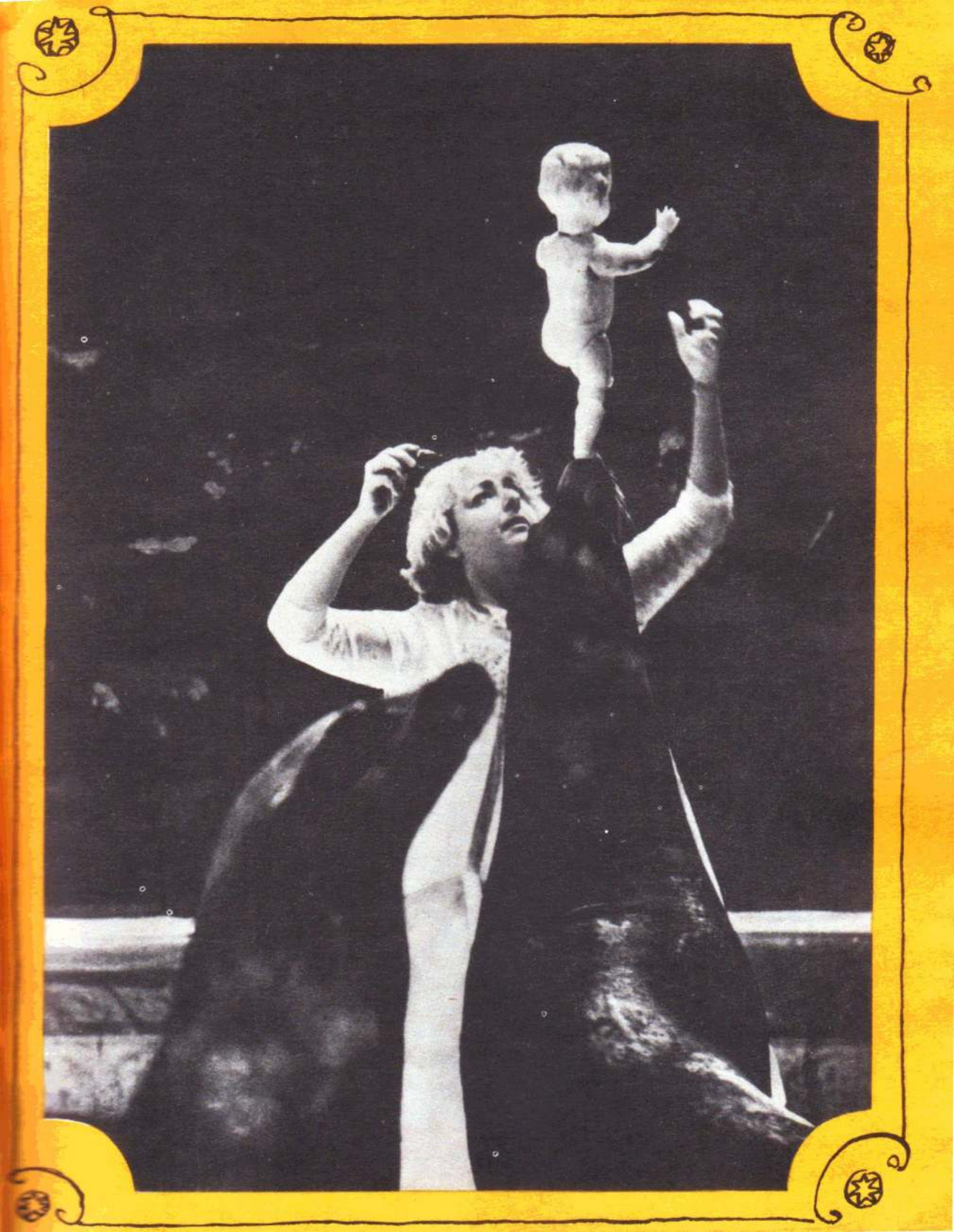
Natalia Durova with a sea lion at home

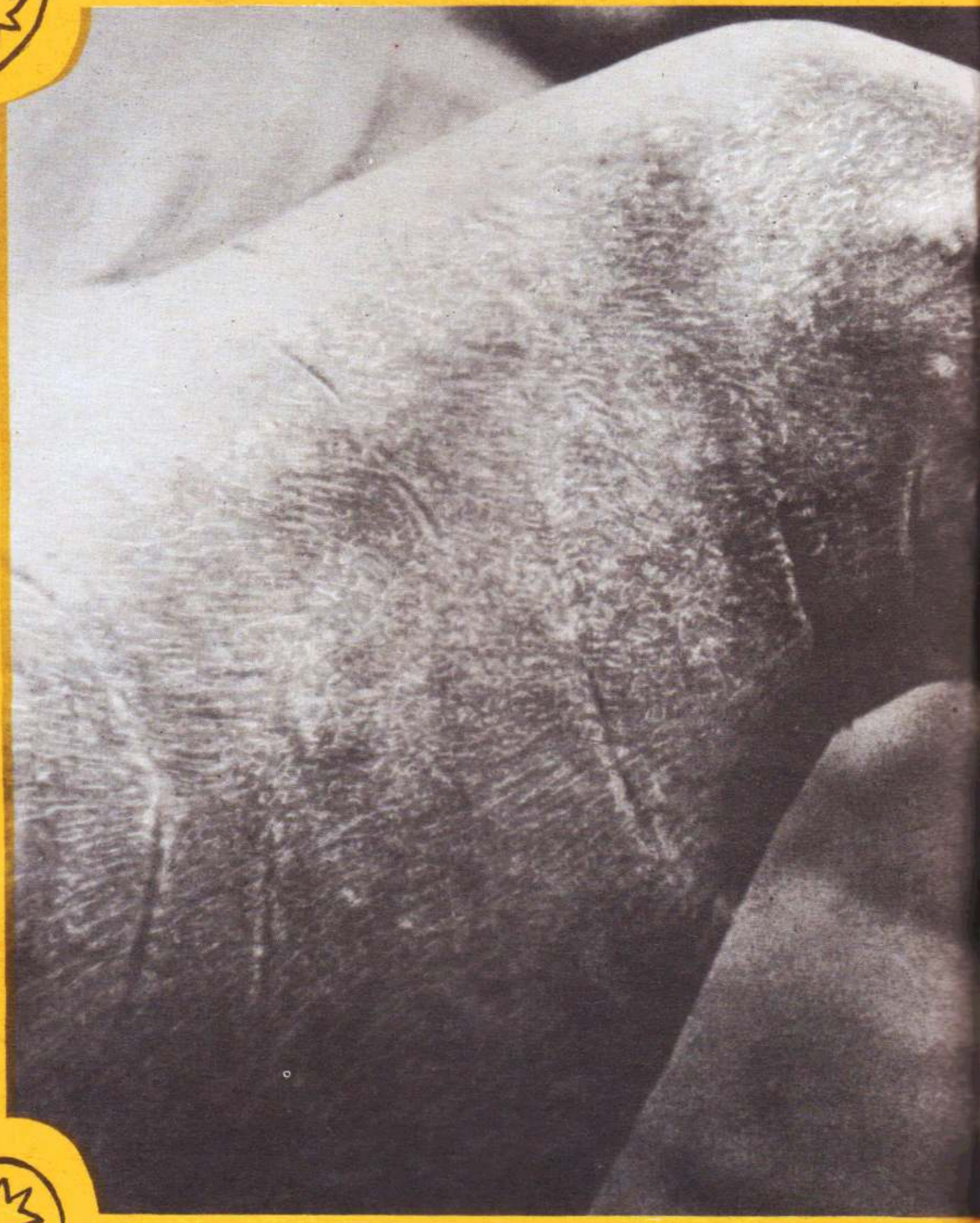


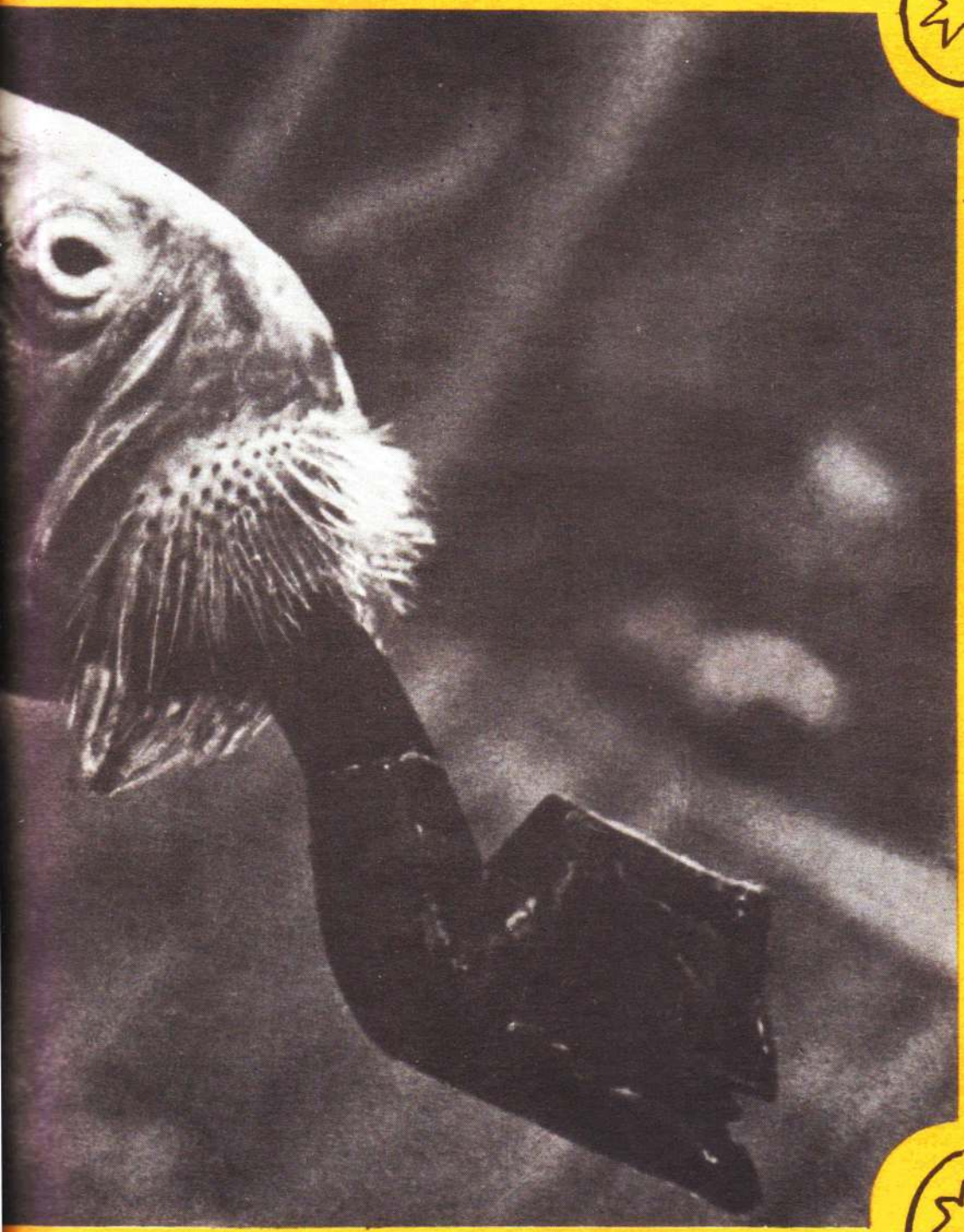




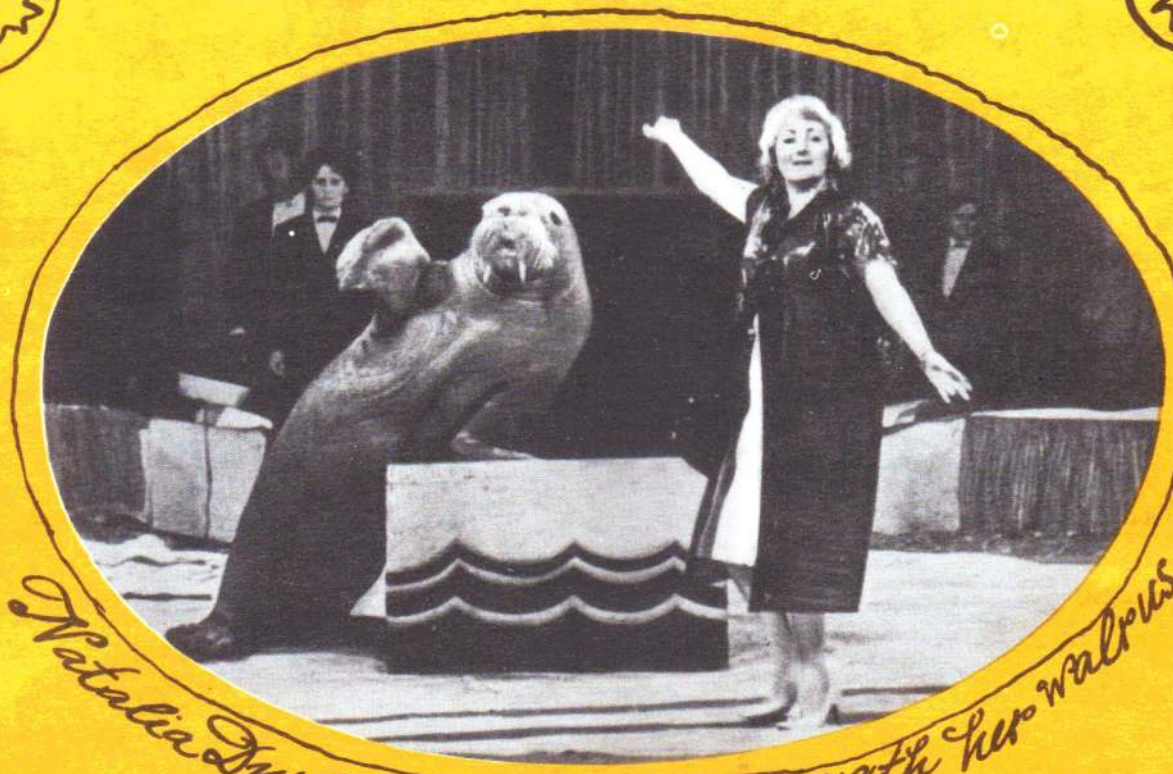
Natalia Durova with a sea lion in the circus ring



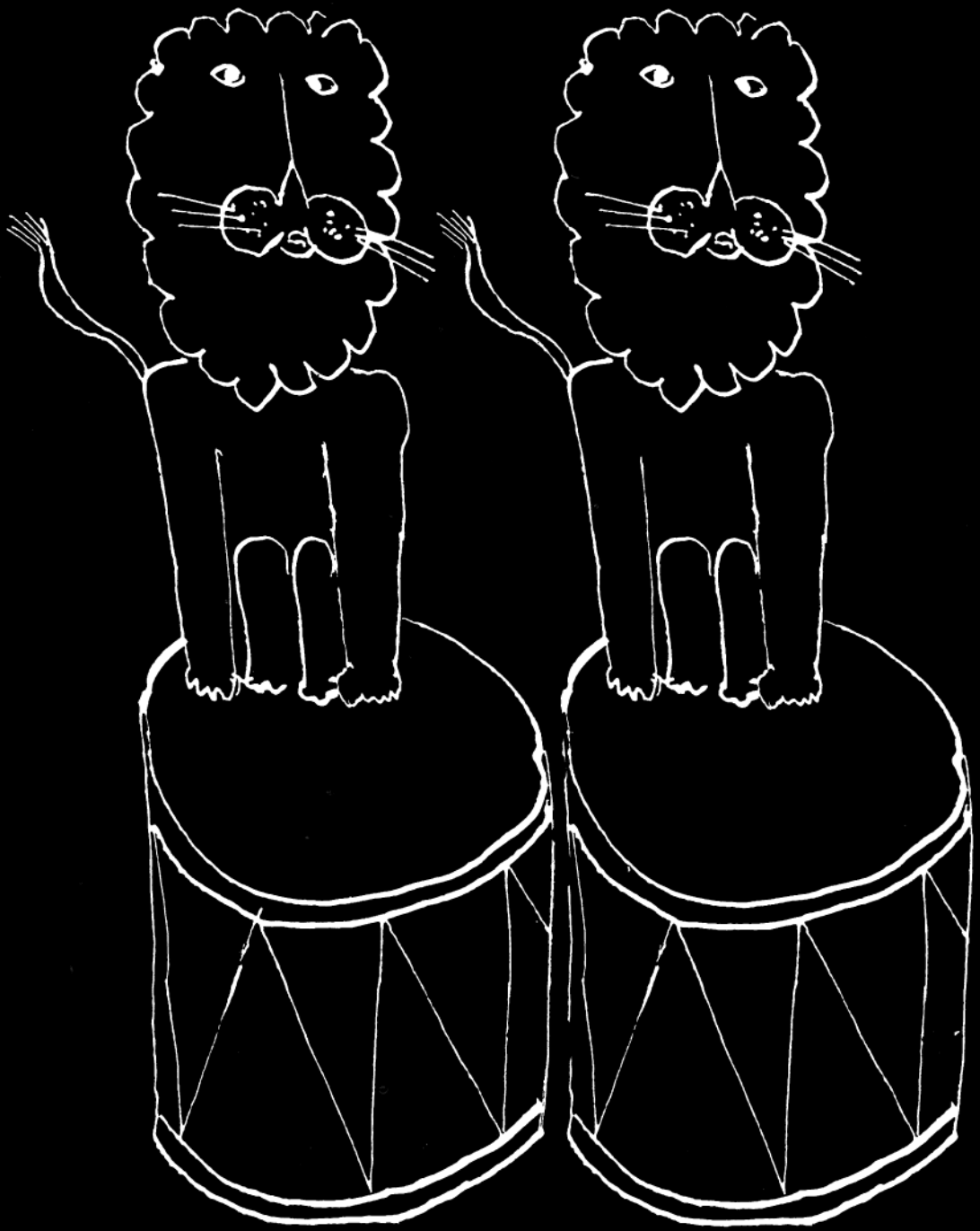




A walrus smoking a pipe

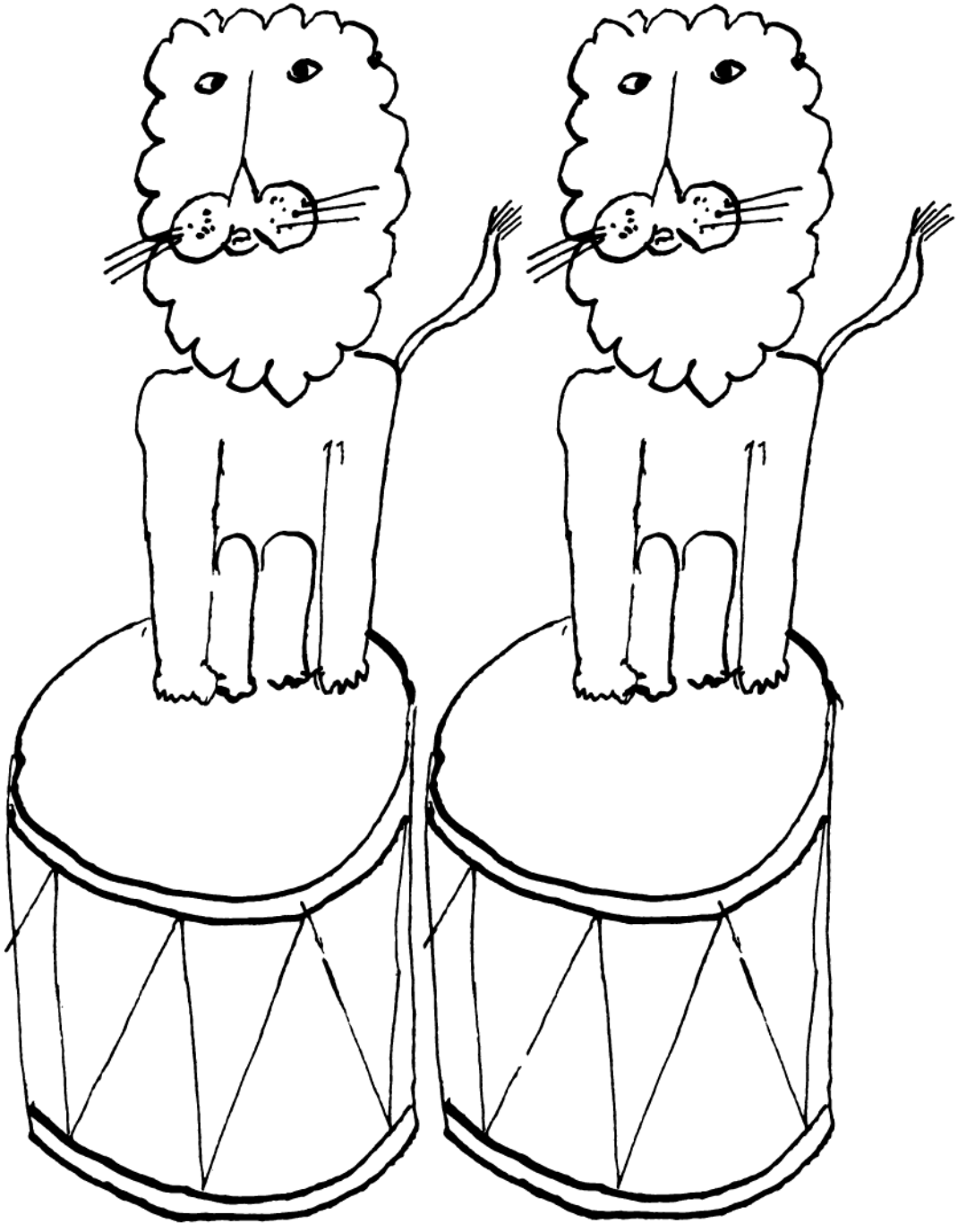


Natalia Durova with her walrus



AFTERWORD

Natalia Durova: Her Life and Books



"Our Family Is Remarkable..."

My father dreamed of having a son who would grow up and carry on his work and family name but a girl was born...

What could be done?! Nothing! When his girl was five she was dressed as a boy and taken into the circus ring.

She entered it smiling, holding her father's hand and dressed in the same traditional Durov costume as her father (a frilly ruff and short knee-length satin pantaloons).

The audience applauded them. The world-famous name of the Durov family was continued.

Thus began her life at the circus: an amazing life in which a girl had to take the place of a boy.

She helped her father train animals, some of which were very dangerous beasts of prey and she prepared her own acts.

She wasn't asked if she liked doing so because she had no alternative. Circus artists' children always helped their parents, inherited their skill and themselves became artists at an early age. This was considered quite normal.

Something similar had happened in their family a long time ago, over a hundred years before she was born. A young girl called Nadezhda Durova, disguised herself in men's clothing, secretly left her family home and making herself out to be a young man, joined the Russian army in the field. She distinguished herself in the battles against Napoleon's troops who had invaded Russia and was personally awarded by Field-Marshal Kutuzov. Then she again won fame — this time as a writer. Her literary talent was not

only praised by her readers. The greatest Russian poet Pushkin and the greatest Russian critic Belinsky wrote with admiration about her.

The "cavalry girl's" (as she was nicknamed) writing desk and her water-colour portrait are to this day kept like treasures in Natalia Durova's Moscow flat.

"Our family is remarkable," Leonid Durov, Natalia Durova's great-grandfather, used to like repeating when he remembered the heroine of the 1812 Patriotic War. Oh, if only he knew what lay in store for his sons, Vladimir and Anatoly...

They, too, secretly ran away from home because they had fallen in love with the circus. They did all sorts of jobs, calling in the crowds at fair tents and working as acrobats and conjurers.They drew caricatures and composed political verses and eventually became world-famous clowns and animal trainers and the founders of one of the most outstanding circus dynasties. Vladimir (Natalia's grandfather) also became an eminent zoopsychologist.

And young Natalia, the only daughter of the renowned trainer Yuri Durov, had to, whether she liked it or not, continue the famous name of her remarkable family with credit.

Now Natalia Durova, a Merited Artiste of the Russian Federation, is the favourite authoress of millions of young readers in the Soviet Union.

Her unique circus programmes have been seen in many countries of the world (clippings of enthusiastic reviews from dozens of foreign newspapers are kept in her book-case) and more and more of her books are being published for readers abroad.

"I Came to Say Goodbye..."

So, she joined the circus the day she was born and always travelled with it from town to town. Everywhere she went she was a great success and was awarded with flowers, smiles and applause.

As a small child she became used to the rattle of train wheels. The packing and unpacking of hefty circus props and the essential "household" belongings of her father, mother and herself were all in the usual run of things.

The family was always on the move and before little Natalia had time to make friends, it was always time to leave and who knew whether she'd meet them again or not.

One can just imagine how many tears were shed, how many affectionate words were exchanged, how many promises were made and how many letters were written...

Then for several years Natalia was left at school in Moscow in the care of her aunt, her mother's sister. Her parents decided that Natalia should receive a proper education. During this period her parents hardly saw her except in the school holidays. Of course, she missed her parents terribly and no amount of good marks at school could make up for that.

Natalia's flare for writing became evident at school. Her compositions were original and rich in thought and observation. What's more, she was an excellent story-teller and mimic. Her listeners rolled with laughter when they recognised their friends. The young story-teller was good at creating someone's portrait in a few words by using his characteristic turns of phrase. Her sense of humour was very subtle and mature.

In 1951 Natalia Durova entered the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow where young writers studied.

Talent and work experience were essential to gain a place at this institute and Natalia Durova had both.

At the institute each student as a rule writes about what he knows best. Natalia Durova knew about the circus best and began writing about trained animals. She also knew children well and began writing, first and foremost, for them.

Her stories were both happy and sad. The reader saw the incredibly hard daily work that lay behind the festive atmosphere of the circus. She at once found the right narrative intonation.

After she left the institute, the young authoress's books were published one after the other: *The Death of Old Jumbo* (1957), *Kitty* (1959), *Nikita and the Squirrel* (1960), *The Children's Theatre* (1962), *Your Turn*! (1962), *The Circus Ring* (1965).

Six books in eight years and what splendid ones at that! They brought the writer great fame and put her on a par with the best children's authors.

Nothing is fictional in her books and only the names are sometimes changed. The writer hides neither her love of the circus nor her fears from her readers. Neither does she hide her tragic moments. In *Kitty*, for instance, she writes: "...I didn't see the brightly floodlit ring any more. An irreparable tragedy befell me: my mother died. I realised I wouldn't go back to the circus for some time... I came to say goodbye to Kitty..."

In one way or another in each of her books the sorrow of parting — parting with dear ones, friends, the circus and childhood — is felt.

But life goes on with its endless round of new acquaintances, joys, and sad farewells...

"The Performance Is Over..."

Writing takes up all of one's life. So does the circus. But a person only has one life. So, one has to sacrifice either writing or the circus...

This was an especially hard problem for Natalia Durova. Her circus fans were waiting for new circus numbers and her readers were waiting for new books. Finding a solution was very difficult...

The finale march is always sadly uplifting. A few minutes later the following announcement is made: "The performance is over. Good night!"

The lights go out, the spectators go home and most of them will have a good, restful night.

The performers change in their little dressing-rooms. They, too, will go home to rest, but not all of them.

A telegram from a Moscow publishing house is lying on Natalia Durova's table: "Awaiting manuscript of your new book stop all deadlines over."

The editorial staff at the Moscow publishing house are worried because their publishing plan is under threat of not being fulfilled. They do not know that she has had an especially hard day because Lel the sea lion has either started to play up or has fallen ill. They

also do not know that the "star" of her new number, Vasilisa the walrus, was recently killed in an accident. She was the only trained walrus in the world and so much effort was put into training her! Four years of work have been wasted and Natalia Durova will have to start from scratch again.

She leafs through the manuscript of her future book. Strictly speaking, it isn't a book because it hasn't been finished and many of the chapters have been written in a hurry. Some will have to be rewritten. But when?! No, she doesn't envy anyone but even so some writers are fortunate enough to sleep at night and sit down at their writing desk in the morning and write as much as they like.

There was a time when she could do so, too.

But her mornings are different. She comes to the cages at day break to be with the animals, to look them over, and feed them. Then the rehearsals begin. A trainer's daily life is exhausting and in the evening there's a performance, two on Saturdays and three on Sundays. Then there are the constant moves from one town to another and the foreign tours in which you answer not only for yourself and your renowned family but for the whole Soviet circus...

The clock hands move round to 1 a.m. There's a cautious knock on the door and the caretaker calls: "You're wanted on the phone. It's Moscow..."

Oh, yes! She ordered this call yesterday! She feels slightly anxious and has to find out that everything's alright at home and that her son Mikhail is well. She hardly ever sees him...

Her aunt, her mother's sister, loves the boy very much but she has a hard time with him because she's often seriously ill and Natalia's husband, an eminent actor at the Moscow Art Theatre is constantly busy with rehearsals during the day and performances in the evenings.

So, she asks herself what is more important: the circus, literature or her one and only son's upbringing.

Yes, she'll try to make sure he chooses his own profession. Things are simpler now. After her mother's death, her father remarried and a son was finally born in the new family: Yuri Durov, Jr. The male line of the Durov's dynasty is being continued.

"What Magic Means..."

In ten years (from 1966 to 1976) she didn't publish a single new book and only extracts from her unfinished stories and short stories were printed.

Much more was written about her by other people who told of her remarkable animals and her circus performances. Fine photo reportings were also published.

Everything seemed to be going fine.

In 1976 a volume of her works was published with a very sad dedication: "In memory of my parents — Zinaida and Yuri Durov, who devoted their lives to the Soviet circus."

Her father, a USSR People's Artiste, had died. During a performance in Belgium he felt unwell and died a few days later. His son began to perform with the animals that were left and seemed to be coping although he had a long way to catch up with his father...

And she was getting less and less satisfaction from her work. Whatever she was doing, she kept thinking about her son. She had never found being separated from him so unbearable.

Here is an extract from her new manuscript, "My House on Wheels": "My dear, fair-haired son. I am now travelling far away and doing work which you know nothing about... I'm trying to warm up, wrapped in a padded jacket... Then, after dirtying my hands with coal dust in the corner, I'll light the stove so that it's feeble heat warms the road-weary inhabitants of this strange house. This is what lies behind the magic story which the children will see at the circus. It's easy to give magic but it's so hard to keep up a magic which is alive, interesting, good, amazing and different like all the animals around me.

"When you grow up, my darling, you'll forgive Mummy for the first wrongs she did you. You'll forgive her because you'll understand a lot: you'll understand what magic means, what work means, what life means and you'll give magic to people, too..."

Such a sad, heart-rending note hadn't appeared in any of her previous books, even when she wrote about far more dreadful things: when she was mauled by a lynx, when her father was bitten by a sea lion and when her mother tragically died.

New notes came into the writer's work together with new thoughts and feelings. Now her son was among her readers. The true value of circus life was no longer important to the writer in itself but insofar as it would inspire the child to give people magic which was so "easy" to give but so hard to keep up...

But her son was growing up very rapidly and it was already time for him to start school.

Was he really to spend his school years in the same way as she did, sitting at a desk and sadly thinking about how and where his mother was. She remembered herself too clearly at his age.

No, this wasn't why she had given life to him or why she was living and writing her books.

She couldn't possibly give joy to thousands of spectators by letting her son grow up without his mother!

Natalia Durova made the only decision possible and left the circus. She is sure she has left it only for a few years while her son grows up.

"Everything Still Lies Ahead..."

Now she lives in her flat in Moscow and busies herself with all the household chores like most solicitous mothers. She also writes books.

She reads her new stories on the radio and appears on television, too. Almost every day she meets schoolchildren: at schools in the winter and at young Pioneer camps in the summer and tells them about the circus and the trained animals.

Her talks are always successful. The children give her touching presents as mementos. She already has a whole museum collection of children's drawings, embroideries, sculptures and home-made plywood objects. These are mostly children's illustrations to her books—lovely, simple little pictures.

Whenever she feels sad for some reason, she looks through them and they help to cheer her up.

But she still has little time to write new books, especially as she works very enthusiastically in the Moscow section of children's writers of the Soviet Writers' Union and is a member of several editorial boards.

Her main joy is her growing son. He is an independent, bold and

resolute boy. He doesn't like using his parents' fame, hates flattery, is straightforward and states his thoughts outright.

Who knows, perhaps one day someone will write a book about him, but it won't be his mother.

She now has other plans. Firstly, she has to complete her unfinished manuscripts about the circus. Secondly, she had thought of an interesting new book called *Peter and Petka* about the friendship of boys from different countries.

Here are a few lines from its last page:

"Boys! My dear, wonderful boys... I don't know what awaits you or which paths you will choose in life. Everything lies ahead of you.

"But I believe that nothing will interfere with your friendship, loyalty and wishes.

"Shake each other's hand.

"I wish you luck and much happiness, my dears..."

What better way for me, too, to end!

N. Khalatov

The author, an animal trainer from the world-famous Durov family, tells about the circus and her trained animals, the joy of a performance and the hard round of daily work, about what goes on in the arena itself and behind the scenes.